CHAPTER – II

SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN

The term ‘Status’ refers to the position of an individual in a social system. Status also encompasses in itself the notions of rights and obligations of superiority and inferiority in terms of power, authority and grading. Each status or position is explained in terms of a ‘role’ or a pattern of behaviour expected of the occupant of a status and role is thus dynamic aspect of behaviour. Role thus expresses the behavioural pattern of the human beings in a social system of social relationship. The State makes no discrimination between men and women and the rights and privileges of women are equal as per the Constitution of India. Yet the status of women is not equal with men in many respects.

In the context of women status implies: What is her position in the social system? Whether her status is inferior to men or not? Whether her status has been changed or not. The status of women forms one of the most trustworthy and reliable indices of the State and society indicates the nature and direction of social change. According to Fourth world Women Conference held at Beijing in 1995 created much more global awareness about women issues and on questions as to how a vast majority of women in different countries are being maltreated. Like other male dominated societies in the World, women of India were assigned a secondary status, a weaker sections of the society, who were bounded in the four walls of home. The status of women in the Hindu society has changed from time to time. Their position has been variously estimated and diametrically opposite views are held regarding her place in different stages of civilization. For a proper assessment of the status of women, a brief sketch of the Indian women through the ages given below:

2. Ibid.
3. National Commission for Women, Knocking At the Male Bastion, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Marg, New Delhi, p-15
5. Ibid,
Women, Customs and Traditions

The position of women in the early society was much better than that of today. In ancient India, the birth of a daughter was not celebrated but it did not pose a threat of burden to the parents. Early marriages were a liberal system and girls belonging to the ruling families received administrative and military training and there are instances of woman administrators in ancient India. Girls were entitled to same educational facilities as the boys and no limitation was imposed on them. They had the liberty to choice of spouse incase of marriages.

There were many factors, which were responsible for the deterioration of status of Indian women in the medieval times. Early marriage became a rule to safeguard the honour and chastity of girls. The Hindu Law gave unequal treatment to women. Some evil socio-religious practices, superstitions, sinister customs and traditions cropped up in the social system, which ultimately pushed them in the darkness of total degradation of women. Some of these evil practices were: early marriage, enforced widowhood, marital status, sati system, temple prostitution, purdah system, dowry system, female infanticide, inheritance and the evil practices of polygamy and polyandry. All these evil customs and traditions made the Hindu social structure, a stumbling block where the entire road to women’s progress was stopped and they became a victim of social oppression and depression. So it is not difficult to assess the general condition of Hindu women when there existed such inhuman, cruel and barbarous customs in the Hindu society. These practices were the product of medieval India.

The custom of early marriage had its beginning in medieval India. It was performed at the tender age of three or four. The girl was married at an age when she should have been playing with dolls. The girl was overburdened to care for her husband and family when she did not understand the value of family and the difference between a husband and a brother. There was no maximum age limit of her spouse. She was married even with the man of 50/60 years of age. As a result, a large number of child wives died at an early age and an early forced widowhood. So the custom of early marriage ensured that the girls learned the traditions of new family and transferred

6. Ibid.

34
their loyalties to the new family. Child marriage particularly became a problem to the female children as it turned them into a childbearing machine. After marriage their living styles became restricted whereas a male child had every liberty to interact with the society. She lived completely isolated from the society and had no chance of coming into the mainstream of economics and politics. Child marriage was directly responsible for the increasing number of widows among Hindus. Because of early marriage the death rates of children too was very high.

Hindu marriage system also does not increase the position of women. A woman after her marriage became the property of her husband and act according to his wishes, serve the family and should remain ready to tolerate all the tortures silently. The position of Hindu women has been a subject of controversy. Manu said, “The father takes care of her in childhood, the husband in youth, the son during old age”. A woman does not deserve freedom. But the same Law Giver also said that “ the God resides where women are honoured”. A woman as a mother has occupied a respectable place in the society. Manu, the Law Giver said that a mother “is more to be revered than a thousand fathers”.

There is no evidence of when the evil custom of sati entered in the Hindu society. This was the ritual suicide of wives after the death of their husband. Sati was prevalent among the upper Caste Hindus for at least 2000 years. Under this system, a young widow or even an old one had to immolate herself on her husband’s pyre. The belief goes like that the main dharma of a wife is to serve her husband and with his death she becomes irrelevant for the family and the society. So the evil practice of sati and widow burning became a well-established practice in many parts of India.

The evil custom of enforced widowhood lead to the deterioration of women in the society. Though sati system was prohibited through legal provisions but the condition of the widows was not upgraded. Widow re-marriage was prohibited and the evil custom of widowhood compelled to shave her head, wear white borderless cloths, be devoid of ornaments and luxuries of life, eat vegetarian food and was not
permitted in the auspicious functions of the family. Her in-laws inhumanly treated a widow. She was blamed for her husband's death. Some social reformers studied the deplorable condition of women and among them were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ranade, and Dayananda Saraswati etc. struggled for the justice of women and started re-marriage of widows.

Although widow re-marriage has legal sanction, but there is rare example of widow re-marriages. Whenever a widow thinks to re-marry, the traditions bound society will not permit her and suppress her through bitter criticism. Till now, widow re-marriages are not welcome by the society. So, the legal provisions are not sufficient enough until and unless the societal system accepts the widow marriage as a natural step, it cannot start.

The custom of purdah system was absent in the ancient India and its inception started just after the Muslim invasion of India. Purdah means covering a woman's face with cloth. It is veil, especially one serving to screen women from the eye of strangers. Purdah was strictly observed among the women of North India and the women of higher classes during the Muslim rule.

Muslim ladies also covered them with a burqa from head to foot. Women of the lower strata were completely free from purdah system. It did not have religious sanction. Purdah system later received the sanction of the Hindu customs and traditions and became the status symbol.

The custom of dowry was completely unknown in ancient India. The system started from the medieval period. Dowry has become a burden to the parents who were financially weak and found it difficult to marry off their daughters. It has become a social custom rather than a social evil. In the Tribal societies, the custom of bride price is too oppressive where the groom's father pays the bride price to the bride's father. The Government of India has passed the Anti-Dowry Act in 1961 to check the evil. But unfortunately till now the young men and their parents are interested to accept dowry in marriages.

Another evil custom that was prevalent among the orthodox Hindus was
infanticide. Girls were killed immediately after their birth because a son was mostly welcome than a girl, as the former will carry out his parent’s last funeral rites. A daughter was a liability to the parents and they get relief after her marriage. This practice of infanticide was mostly common among the Rajputs and Jats. In Punjab it was prevalent everywhere. An infant girl was killed either by drugging or by mixing poison in the milk and by using salt. Such were the heinous crimes committed against the girl children by the parents.

Women had no legal safeguard to the possession of economic position in the Hindu family. A woman had to maintain her livelihood at the mercy of the male members of the family. She could not inherit her father’s property. A married woman couldn’t inherit her deceased husband’s property. Her children inherited her property.

Polygamy was also a major reason, which has lowered the status of women. Polygamy i.e. having more than one wives was prevalent in Bengal, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. In Bengal, a kulin was allowed to marry more wives as he had the prestigious position in the society. The parents even did not bother to marry his ten years girl to a kulin of sixty years. Polygamy had a legal sanction among the Muslims. Law makes polygamy for the Hindus as crime whereas polygamy was allowed to the Muslims. Among their favour too, the legislation has not effecting in eradicating the evil custom. A man having a wife alive could not marry for the second time (and it is a case of societal degradation of women) A woman having more than one husband is called polyandrous. This system is practiced in Himachal Pradesh, U.P and among the Todar in the Nilgiris of Madras. It was practiced mainly due to the limited area of lands, to control population and bind the family together.

The picture of Assam in relation to the status of women was not different to the rest of India. In ancient Assam women had a respectable place in the society and they were worshipped as Goddess. There was no difference between men and women in the society. Women of Assam did not have to face certain evil customs like dowry, female infanticide, and sati etc. which were prevalent in other parts of the country.
The position of Assamese women can be estimated from the Ahom history and literature. Historical evidences tell us that the status of all classes of women were not equal. Women of the lower classes moved freely but restrictions were imposed on the movement of the higher-class women. The social status of the higher caste women was not at all satisfactory. The evil custom of dowry was not permitted in Assam. The parents offer gifts and cloths and ornaments to the bride through there was no compulsion. So the fear of the birth of the female child was absent because the parents were not worried about their marriage with huge amount of dowry. But the habit of mental preparation starts immediately after the birth of a girl as they are the assets of others. As a result the percentage of girls education is comparatively low than the boys. The girls are to remain within the four walls of home and society. The purdah system was not strictly observed in Assam. The cases of bride burning, bride tortures were absent in Assam. The system of sati was not observed in ancient Assam. Widow re-marriages were common amongst all the sections of people, except a few high Caste Hindus.

In the medieval period, the position of women in the Assamese society deteriorated. Women lost respectable place in the family. The husband was the guardian and the super authority to women. She was not allowed to anything without his consent. Regarding the inheritance of the property, the Assamese women were completely devoid of this right. She could enjoy her father’s property. As a daughter customarily does not inherit the immovable property of the father some durable consumer goods are presented at the time of marriage. Again in case of a widow, her children inherited her deceased husband’s property. The customs and traditions of the society have brought the same status to the women of Assam like other parts of India. During the medieval period, the condition of widows had deteriorated to a certain extent. Widowhood was an evil custom existed in the society where a woman had to lead miserable life and this was the total moral degradation of women. Assamese society is patriarchal in nature where woman as mother, mother-in-law, daughter and daughter-in-law has subordinate status. A male member has traditionally

17. Ibid.
20. Ibid, p-42
a higher status than a woman. In the rural areas women are engaged in household activities. The traditional families of Assam did not know women employment.

Purdah system started in the Assamese society in the new name where married women are expected to cover their heads with the end of the piece of cloth worn in the upper part of the body in the presence of elderly members. Dowry system, which was completely out of practice in Assam, started recently in many parts. Recently there are also some instances of bride tortures in several parts of Assam. Girl children of the high Caste Hindus got married at an early age. Muslim society also practiced the custom of early marriage. From the very childhood girls learnt that they are to become expert in domestic activities. As a result, the girls in Assam were expert in the skills of spinning, weaving and domestic chores. In Assam, the practice of female infanticide is not prevalent but there are some evidences of detection of female sex and it has become rampant in some parts of Assam like the rest of the country. Though the equality of rights of men and women are legalized but yet the seeds of social customs and traditions are not uprooted from the society. Still women are treated as second-class citizen. There is no doubt that the new legal status of women could contribute substantially to our present social structure but due to the limitations of legal system itself, the legality was overpowered by those norms which were in favour of ascribing more importance to traditions. Inspite of the various legislative steps the evil customs still exist in the society. The customs of child marriage, dowry is continuing in the society. Today, the custom of early marriage continues in the rural areas, between the illiterate and the poor strata of the society. Cases of widow marriages are still rare, though the law has permitted it. Regarding succession of property, even a slightest demand from the side of daughter is treated as a social sin by all sections of the society. Due to the prevalence of customs and traditions of the society women cannot come out of their houses and participate in the decision-making process of the country. Women, out of the fear of societal and familial restrictions are keeping themselves busy with the household activities and most of the women are satisfied with this system and never challenges against the system. The number of woman leaders in our country is still marginal. Women, inspite of their dedicated service to the State have nothing to do in the administration of the country. Customs and traditions of society have bounded them within the circle of home. Though a few women from
the higher strata of the society comes out boldly and participate in the administration but that does not generalize the ordinary women of the middle/ lower middle class families. Women are guided mostly by tradition, often less educated and religious minded. They feel shy of outdoor activities. That is why women in Assam are less interested in politics and does not show any interest to seek place in the political parties.

The status of women in the Assamese society was somehow better than the rest of India. The woman legislators of Assam, who were active in politics, were not affected by the evil customs and traditions of the society because they were from the well-to-do families, having long political background. Majority of the woman leaders of Assam joined politics after the death of their husbands who were prominent leaders of Assam. The evil custom of widowhood could not inflict on them. They got all the facilities from their families, which the women in general are deprived of. As they were educated and devoid of societal bondages which ultimately led to sufferings, engaged them wholeheartedly to the service of the Nation. Three woman members expressed that they did not possess hesitation of being woman and serving the Nation boldly. The woman legislators who have joined the administration from 1952 onwards gained popularity in such a way that many of them were elected for more than one terms. But their service to the State cannot be counted in general because their number is very few. To increase the number of woman legislators in the administration or to make equal with male members, the society must be free from the evil customs and traditions.

Women and Family

The term “Family” has different meaning to different people. To some family is the centre of security, resources, power, shelter, love, affection and a life long insurance against the harsh world. For others it means the feeling of insecurity, uncertainty, hatred, forced labour, torture and a threat to life. More women are in the second group because in a patriarchal society there is always gender deprivation and women subordination and sometimes women are treated as the beast of burden. Family in India largely exists in the framework of patrilineal descent, but differences in its

form, function and process are crucial to the position of women.\textsuperscript{22} So, it is not surprising enough that women have a subordinate status and lack of educational facilities, health hazards, lack of employment opportunities, social hatred and neglecting treatment etc.

So, a family is a basic social unit where men, women and children live in a network of mutual ties, obligations, understandings and responsibilities. It is the most important area where all members are tied up with the feelings of affection, dedication and a sense of emotional togetherness. Through the family, the members can fulfill all their aims and objectives of life. A family is a centre of peace because after the restless work in the outside world, a member returns home in the family. People shares joys and sorrows, love and hate with each other in the family. A family gives the first teachings of education and it is up to the family the future of a child depends. It prepares us social beings through transmission of tradition and cultural, moral and spiritual values from one generation to another. A family has vital importance more to a woman than a man, as one can talk of the existence of the latter without the family whereas the former cannot imagine about their independent status or existence without dealing with the family problem. Women are in general aspirant to be mother and it is the society, which celebrates through marriage system. A woman is bound to observe her familial responsibilities. The social value placed on the familial role of women is also responsible for her subordination to man and for lack of access to economic and political power in spite of her larger contribution in to the family and National economy. Women are deprived from the society and the family and in return a great burden of responsibilities are imposed on her.

Women always falls victim of domestic violence's like bride-burning, wife-beating and mental harassment by the in-laws. So Indian society is largely patrilineal except a few matrilineal communities in the South Western and Northeastern regions. In the matrilineal societies like Khasis and Garo where women enjoy a decisive role but in reality they do not possess higher status. In a patrilineal society, the man is the sole authority and the women have to work for the satisfaction of man. The ideal women are those who do not strive to break the family laws. The salvation and

\textsuperscript{22} Pujari, Premlata and Kaushik, Vijay Kumar, Women Power in India, Women in Indian Democracy and Development, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, 1994, p-246.
happiness of women revolve around their virtue as chastity as daughters, wives and widows.

The joint family system of the Hindu society is also based on ties where the authority concentrated on the male i.e., head of the family. A family gets reduced in number with the marriage of daughters who go to other families. The joint family system reduced the independence and separate identity of its members. The concentration of authority remains in the hands of the senior-most male member of the family and even other male members are subordinate to him and should carry out his orders. In the joint family system, the status of women was miserable. It is very difficult for a woman to maintain her independent status in the family. She faces problems regarding her educational career, future planning in continuing job, securing job and can not take steps independently. In this regard her future programmes depend upon the senior members of the family. But a woman enjoys a very good status in the single family where parents and children are the partners in the family system. She plays a dominant role in the family planning. The husband is dependent upon women because the whole management of caring and rearing of the children depends upon her. So the absence of joint family system, the freedom of association and movement and economic contribution of both husband and wife in the family, a woman.

In the patrilineal family, a son is looked upon as the natural succession of the family. Parents get relief with the birth of a son. All the expenditures for the nourishment of a daughter seems misuse to the parents where as a son who retains the loyalties throughout his life is considered as a good investment and an insurance for the future. The religious requirement of a son is also compelling reason for male preference. A son is to carry out patrilineage, perform the last funeral rites without which salvation is not possible. Women in spite of her hard work and dedicated service to the family cannot play a dominant role. She has to play a marginal role in the decision-making. The male members of the family lower her voice. Of course she has a commanding authority over the domestic matters. All the members of the family including women take decisions about the education and marriage of daughters. A woman's position changes in different steps. Woman as a bride is very submissive

24 Pruthi, Raj and Sharma, Status of Women in India, Anmol Publications, PVT, LTD. New Delhi, p-101
and tolerate but as mother-in-law her position gets upgraded. She tries to implement all the tortures she tolerated as bride on her daughter-in-law. So the same woman’s status in the family and the society depends upon the husband’s social position of women in the family inspite of her influential role or service. Her status also fluctuates with the amount of dowry she brings from her parent’s home. Women in the Assamese families are less neglected and less disregarded in comparison with many parts of India.25

Assamese society is a patriarchal society where women as mother, mother-in-law, daughter, daughter-in-law and wife has an important role to play in the family. They live in an atmosphere of understanding and dignity. Still there are many victims of age-old traditions and customs. The traditional attitude towards women is not much different from the rest of India. Traditionally, a married woman’s world is her family where she is bounded by the ties of responsibility towards her husband and other members of the family. A woman cannot think anything against her husband and it is detrimental to the family and the society. The contribution of women in the family and society was though praiseworthy, they did not get prominence in the society. Women were considered as subordinate to males and were confined to household chores only. In the Assamese society like the rest of India, a husband’s position was like the God where women worship him. She has no separate identity and her personality was to be merged with her husband’s one.

In the traditional society of Assam, the women are not allowed to take part in the decision-making process. Traditional society does not consider women fit for political job and they are fit for household purpose only. Again women are greater hindrances in the way of women’s progress. They do not get enough scope to demonstrate their ability before the men folk in the traditional society. The number of woman political participants can only be increased only when women becomes conscious about rights. Being the half of the population, women must have equal share in the Government and how the male section only without their participation can determine their destiny.

Changing Trends in Assam

Gradually a slow change is noticed in the thought of women towards family and society. Women are no longer dependent on their children at their old age. Very frequently they express lack of confidence in sons who are well-placed that they would take care of their ailing parents disturbing their family life and the comfort and privileges provided by the job or position. Parents express their confidence on daughter who would extend help to them. Now a days girls in the Assamese families donot confine themselves within the four walls of home and each and every one tries to earn in order to extend financial help to her parents and later on to her husband. So, in the lower and middle class families women work to supplement their family income but in the upper classes women work mainly to develop their talent and raise their own status. There is no area left vacant where women’s entry is impossible. Weaving which was the strong unifying force and enhanced the prestige of women among all the sections of the Assamese society but now they gave up the habit of weaving and has been converted to an instrument of living profession to the downtrodden people in the State. The age-old traditional ideas about women are changing rapidly both in the families and outside world too. Even in the rural areas of Assam the attitude towards girl is changing. The various women oriented legislations are also the great safeguard towards the interest of women. The Phrase “Women’s Empowerment” has become an important topic of discussion amongst the academicians and policy makers in the State. The Government of Assam like the Central Government has undertaken many women related policies for the empowerment of women.

There is law on women’s side but prejudices, hostile attitudes and resistance and social taboos still hold them back. It is therefore necessary to set up effective machinery for the implementation and enforcement of laws by the Government and then only the various progressive steps towards women’s welfare will be fruitful. However, inspite of the many hurdles in their way to success, more and more women are taking part in the social activities, economic activities and political activities too. The number of woman participants in the electoral politics of Assam increasing day

26. Hazarika, Dr. Niru, Changing Women Status in Assam, Journal of Political Science, Published by Academic Staff, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, 2003, p-43
27. Ibid,
by day. Their participation in the Assam Legislative Assembly has an increasing trend. Their participation at the grass root politics is also encouraging and if this trend is continuing, the day is not far away when women will equally share in the legislative business with their male counterparts.

**Women and Education**

Education is the key to success in life for both men and women. Education has a vital role for the upliftment of women. A woman can identify herself, can establish herself in life and take share in the decision-making body only when she is educated. Education enables a woman to cross the barriers of race, age, class or status. It makes her conscious about her legal rights. It keeps herself fit and strengthens her mind to fight against all kinds of social ills and injustices. Education is the door that unlocks to welcome her into a world of good health and healthy children and an understanding husband just as much as it enables her to fight for her less fortunate sisters. Education has the important value system for the upliftment of the society. It is the light, which enlightens the darkness of the society. Education frees the society from all kinds of evils.

The word Education comes from the Latin word 'Educa' means bringing out the potentialities of the individual for self-development. Education is the most powerful instrument to bring a social change. Women’s development is possible only through education. Education of women means the education of home, society and the country. The social reformers have emphasized on women’s education. Mother is the primary teacher of the child. A child’s basic education starts at home. Good citizens are an asset to a country and it is the mother who makes this asset of the Nation. Education is the via through which the progress and development of women are possible. Education facilitates women in changing her status in the family and society. Though education for both boys and girls are necessary but the boys are comparatively in good position in the society. Male children had a preferential place in the family where as girls are in most of the families neglected, less cared and deprived of their basic rights. In most of the families girls don’t get enough scope of educational facilities. Till now people could not come out of their age old superstitions about

girls and they think that expenditure on girls means misuse of money and manpower because after some years girls will be handed over to the husband’s family through marriage. It is only through the light of education people can come out of this kind of superstitions and prejudices. Making women literate and educate them are pre-requisites not only for their equality and empowerment but for the development of the Nation. It will inspire women to come forward and lead to active participation in social life and it will ultimately lead to the participation in the administration of the State. Being the half of the population not even 10 percent women are politically active. But education is the only instrument which will make women aware of their due share in public life and responsibilities. More and more women will come out of the fourwalls of home and take part in the Nation-building process of the country. Women’s mass participation in politics will make a corruption-free society. Therefore it is only through education that women can aspire for political participation either directly or by seeking public office through election or nomination, or indirectly by casting politically conscious vote in favour of the leader of their choice. Education of women will place them on equal footing with men in decision-making positions in economic and political fields.

All over the world, the movement for improving women’s status has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for social change. The presence of the Foreign Missionaries, introduction of English language as a medium of instruction brought some changes in the education system. The influence of the Foreign Missionaries as well as the struggles of the social reformers was a landmark in the history of women’s education. The Constitution of India has made provision for women’s education. There is no discrimination and both the boys and girls should get equal facilities of education. In pursuance of the Constitutional directives, the Government has enacted a number of laws and programmes in Five Year Plans to raise the status of women particularly through education. Inspite of the Governmental steps women’s education ratio has not increased much. In 1951, the female literacy was 7.93 percent in the country and in 1991, the female literacy consist of 39.42

31. ibid,
percent, whereas male literacy consist of 68.86 percent. Rural women constitute 80 percent of the population where the rate of female literacy is very low. Therefore, women need to educate themselves because the country suffers from the lack of education specially women education. The parents should provide equal facilities for education of boys and girls. The age-old tradition of girls need no education should be thrown out.\footnote{Pujari, Premlata and Kaushik, Vijay Kumar, Women power in India, Women in Indian Democracy and Development, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, 1994, p-74.} Unless and until women are educated a society cannot make progress. Through women’s education only the family life and the social life will be enlightened.

In spite of the various efforts done by the reform movement, the social development was very slow in the country\footnote{Ibid.} Women were not lagging behind. They have participated in the freedom movement. With the spread of education women became aware of their rights and duties. Women began to think for themselves, mobilize themselves and organize movements against the British Government, demanded voting right for them. They participated in the Constitution-making body and also shared in the Government till the first Government formed in 1952 after independence. Women of our country have entered in the Parliament, in the State administration, in the local administration, in every services, business and games and sports. But their numbers are very few. Education is a powerful tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. The importance of education was felt Internationally. The different organs of the United Nations Organizations (UNICEF) and experts in women’s liberation suggested for women’s education as the basic step in establishing women’s equality with men. Education is really the sword through which a woman gains knowledge about the outside world and can equip herself to every situation both inside the country and to the outside world.

The position of Assamese women in regard to education was not much better in relation to the rest of India. In our society too, the preference of male children results in the neglect of girl children and deprive them of their basic right to life. It is observed that though female infants are born equal to their male counterparts, the society does not give the girl child the same level of opportunities for development and survival.\footnote{Debi, Renu (editor), Women of Assam, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1994} Most of the female infants die due to the lack of nourishment. Those
who survive learnt from their childhood that they are different from boys and they are not permitted to do the same thing like the boys. So they rear up differently. These traditional beliefs and ideas about the girl child can only be changed with the spread of education.

Education of women is most important because she is the teacher of her child and guides her child in the right direction. The Christian Missionaries had done a lot for the women education in Assam. Before the advent of the British, there was no formal educational institution in Assam. Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter started educational institutions for the girls in Assam. The first Missionary School for girls started at Sibsagar in 1840. The high Caste Hindus refused to send their daughters to the Christian School, the Missionaries had to depend upon for children from the orphan, homeless and Tribal people. So the Christian Missionaries and the British rulers promoted for the development of women education in Assam. It was the Wood’s Dispatch of 1854, which for the first time laid stress on the women education. At the initiative of the Missionaries some girl’s schools were established in different parts of Assam. Parents were reluctant to send their daughters to the schools where foreign language and foreign teaching method was followed. Traditional society of Assam and the prevalence of evil customs, superstitions stood in the expansion of women education. Though various steps have been taken for the progress of women’s education in Assam, yet the percentage is very low in comparison to men.

Table -2.3
Percentage of Male/ Female Literacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Percentage of Literacy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
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<td>16.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>62.34</td>
<td>43.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>64.28</td>
<td>56.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Census of 1951 reveals that only 7.9 percent women was literate in Assam. The number increased to 16 percent in 1961 and 19.6 percent in 1971. The percentage of women literacy rapidly raised in 1991 to 43.70 percent and in 2001 the literacy rate of women increased to 64.28 percent. Women of Assam have entered in all the professions and there is no institution where there is the absence of women. Girl students are ahead of boys in various academic results. Progress of women also can be noticed in the Medical, Engineering, Veterinary, Mass communication etc. They have shown their talent in all the sections. Of course nobody can challenge their talent and proficiencies. They are not less intelligent than the male counterparts. If enough scope is provided to them, they can make progress. But the condition of rural women regarding literacy is poor. Though the women’s literacy rate has increased but not satisfactorily.

The women of Assam are not lagging behind and have entered in all the sectors but their numbers are not encouraging because the rural women are still on the darkness of prejudices, customs, traditions and male dominations which is responsible for the low status of women. The low status of Assamese women is the result of exploitation, male domination in the society. These conditions are the hurdles in the way of women’s progress and development.

The status and position of women has not developed up to the mark. Women being the 50 percent of the electorate could not come to the mainstream of politics. Only 7 to 8 percent women are in administration. Political parties do not consider women fit for political job. Women themselves are not much interested in politics due to the involvement of money and muscle power in politics. Unless and until sufficient number of women is educated their percentage of political participation cannot be increased.

**Women and Social Change**

Everything needs change. Change is a reality. There is change in nature where one after another season comes and changes take place automatically. Changes occur in the human mind. So change is the most pervasive aspect of life. It affects human

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36. Ibid, p-257.
life, family life or social life, health and working conditions and other aspects of life. The reality is that there are process of stability and change that affect human life. They have effects on different sections of people. Here the change is related with the women and social change. The term social change may be defined as “the significant alteration of social structure and cultural patterns through time”. Social change occurs in a social system where there are relationship between different groups and sections of people. The social system includes various groups, organizations, institutions and society. The nature of change occurs slowly in different styles and patterns. And the people are to accommodate themselves with the changing needs of time.

Changes in the lives of the people take place due to the change in the society and these changes are affected by the technological development, urbanization, modernization etc. Thus changes are affected by two factors- one is the materialistic factor like economic production and technology and the second is the idealistic factor like thoughts and beliefs. The material factor may bring changes in the lives of women. Economic production, wealth and resources, scientific technology is the factors, which may change the living pattern of women. Women are also affected by the new technological inventions. But the question is whether majority of the women have the capacity to adapt themselves with the new technologies and can change their situations i.e. coming out of the discriminated, male-dominated society to a free and equal one.

The second factor i.e. the ideas; beliefs and thoughts can change the society. The ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx have great effects on the minds of women. Their ideas and thoughts have changed the society and as a result women too. Social changes also take place due to external aggression and internal unrest, natural calamities and women are the worst-affected by such calamities. The women of Assam are affected by the armed atrocities during the various movements and due to which the changes take place in the State. Change is a common phenomenon in the lives of human beings. In the primitive age when people had no residence, eat fruits and raw meat, and there was no question of tension and status. But with the passage of time people learnt the use of fire, cooked food, clothing sand started family life and later

38. Ibid.
on family came into existence because people cannot live alone and they need a society and then family life came into existence. Spontaneous change and development of human mind, thoughts and ideas began to take place from pre-social stage to social stage and it would continue forever.\textsuperscript{39}

Empowerment of women is a multi-dimensional process, which should enable them to realize and identify their powers in all spheres of life. 'There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors—economic, social, political, education, health care and nutrition and legal'.\textsuperscript{40} Women are oppressed in a society due to the social structure and it is determined by patriarchy that has made women a powerless creature in the hand of men. Hence women are to be empowered socially, economically, and politically. Power cannot be imposed from outside and it has to be acquired by women through consciousness, demand and movement. Since independence, Government has taken various steps and projects for women's empowerment. But these laws and provisions are meaningless unless women became aware of their oppression and male domination. They must take initiative to condemn all these social oppression and organize movements to capture power and only then their status can be changed.

In spite of various kind of oppressions existing in the society some women have been able to occupy high position in politics. The political status of Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, Basundhara Raje Sindhia, Uma Bharati and Mayavati does not indicate the improvement of status of women. This is their acquired status, which they got from their family background. Nowadays also women are not lagging behind and not a single sector remained where women does not enter. Most of the toppers in the universities and in other examinations are women. In spite of the discrimination in the society, it is a positive change.

The idea of social justice is foreign to women unless economic empowerment and social changes initiated to the advantage and betterment of women. The concept of social change for women includes qualitative changes in the health, nutrition, food and educational status. So all over the world, the movement for improving women's status has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for social

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid,
\textsuperscript{40} Kumar Arun, Empowering Indian Women, Sarup and Sons, New Delhi, 2002, p-78
change. The social reformers of the 19th century tried to remove all the evil customs and prejudices from the society through education. Later on education was used to create consciousness among women.

Not only the Foreign Missionaries in India took the various initiatives for the improvement of women education but also the Government has undertaken steps for their educational development. The education and literacy rates are not increased till the girl children are ill treated and did not get enough scope of education. The condition of girl children in the rural areas are deteriorating because the parents did not give preference to the education of their girl children and rather they should be expert in the household activities. If luckily a girl child gets the scope of secondary education but beyond that she cannot cross with the belief that her education will hamper in getting her groom in future. This kind of attitude is found everywhere and the idea about the education of the girl children does not change.

Health and nutrition is another factor where the improvement of it indicates the improvement of the status of women and social change can take place. But unfortunately, the women are less careful about their own health. In the rural areas women are suffering from the problem of ill health and mal-nutrition. A woman has no time to look after her health and she always eats the remains of food, which are left by the other members of the family particularly in the rural areas. Women in a village cannot imagine about the healthy and nutritious food for her and this is mainly due the ignorance, poverty and negligence. In a patriarchal society, the birth of a male child is always welcome. A woman is still ill-treated for giving birth to a girl and sometimes she is forced to give birth again and again for the hope of a boy and hence suffers from mal-nutrition and sure to face unwanted death. Again most of the women in the rural areas are illiterate and they are less careful about their health and hygiene.

In the economic field too women's contribution cannot be neglected. Even in the family of the lower income group women supplement family income despite her household responsibilities. Women performs restless work for the family but in spite of that she gets nothing except mental harassment and physical assault. In the middle class families also women work to supplement their family’s income. But in

\[41.\text{ Ibid,}\]
the upper classes women work mainly to develop their talents and raise their own status. There is a wide gap between the opportunities available to women as compared with men. Since 1947, Indian women have been entering the administrative jobs like IAS, IFS, and IPS but there number is still very small in comparision with men in lower posts in offices. Their number is also very few in higher post in the private companies and industries. So, though there are many scopes but still there is social discrimination against women. It is therefore necessary to set up effective machinery for the implementation and enforcement of laws by the Government.

Though there are social changes in every sphere of life but in real sense the scope of social change did not reach to the mass of the women section of the society. A vast majority of women are still illiterate. The concept of social change is fruitful for the elite section of the society and it has no meaning at all to the lower strata of the society. Every day they are becoming victim of various social crimes. Violence against women is increasing day by day. They include kidnaping of women, rape, dowry deaths, immoral trafficking etc. Everyday there are events of increasing rate of missing females in Assam. The following table shows the number of missing females in Assam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing Females Adults</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Female Children</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traced Female Adults</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traced Female Children</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untraced Female Adults</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untraced Female Childred</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source-Assam Tribune- 22.04.06

So, violence and crime against women are an alarming situation in Assam. They need to be checked. The age-old ideas and attitudes towards women need to be changed. It is possible only with the help of education. Education is the significant instrument through which the mindset of the people can be changed then only the violence and crimes against women can be eradicated from the society. Severe punishment should be given to the criminals who commit crime against women.
Some positive steps are needed to make the social change related to women in Assam more effective—

1. The existing legislations should be reviewed so that equality and social justice can be established in the society. The practice of dowry should be eradicated. Special attention should be given to the social laws that the Child Marriage Restraint Act is respected. Active public support should be mobilized by the Governmental agencies.

2. Education is the most important instrument of social change. Every care should be taken for the development of women’s education. At the higher education level, special incentives like scholarships, hostel facilities and loan facilities should be made available to the girl students of poor families mainly in rural areas of Assam.

3. According to the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, in the employment sector, equal remuneration is to be provided to both the sexes. Employment opportunities are to be provided to women. Assam Government has made 30 percent reservation of posts for women in the State Government offices. Village industries in Assam, which provide scope for the employment of women, should be further promoted.

4. Maternal and childcare facilities should be expanded, particularly in the rural areas of Assam. Nutrition and health education should be given to girls and mothers through all available media and institutions.

5. The establishment of day care centres for the children, crèches should be promoted to help the working mothers. Hostel facilities for working women. Special attention should be given to the physically handicapped women, old age home is to be established and proper rehabilitation of the destitute women should be made.

6. The growth of voluntary organizations especially in rural backward and tribal areas in Assam and in urban slum areas should be promoted to carry out welfare programmes. So, women’s agenda today is “women’s empowerment”. Different women’s groups and organizations are engaged in processes and activities aimed at the development of autonomy, self-control and self-confidence through group solidarity. Women organizations have the highest potential to facilitate their empowerment.
Any attempt at the changing the unequal situation of women and restore gender justice would call for an understanding of the structured nature at both micro and macro levels. Sometimes women are marginalized because the modern work situation requires regular attentive duty by both men and women i.e. appearing at the working spot at the proper time, performing eight hours service, no consideration as mother.

The gender-based division of labour considered, as the root cause of inequality needs to be changed. The change in the division of labour both at the home and in public sphere in order to produce greater gender equality. Equality in every respect in the society, in political positions and at every level equality is needed. Various steps have been adopted to make women’s empowerment more effective. It can be attained through political mobilization, consciousness raising and education.

Only Women’s empowerment can bring changes in the society. Firstly economic empowerment of women is necessary. Unless and until women become economically independent, they will not be able to get political empowerment. The concept of social change is meaningless in a society where 7 to 8 percent women got a chance in the decision-making body. The number of the woman political leaders did not rise up to the mark where about 50 percent of the electorate is women. There are efforts made by the Government for instance, the establishment of a democratic Government providing opportunities to women to participate in the process of gaining political power. Further, law is used as an instrument of social change in many Third World countries. Government has taken certain steps to protect the interest of women. But in spite of that women’s role in politics is marginal. The prospect of social change will not be effective until a majority women is not projected for women empowerment.

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid, p-40