Language Press and Women Empowerment,  
An Analysis with Special Reference to  
Assamese Language News Papers

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Media play an important role in a democratic country. It is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. In the process of women empowerment media can play a very effective role by highlighting the issues of women. In 2001, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a policy document, National Policy for Empowerment of Women. The policy document stressed on the role of the media in the process of women empowerment. It is to be noted that in India the language news papers are having wide marked as compared to the English newspapers. Language newspapers are able create an imminent place in the society. This paper makes and attempts to analyse the role of the Assamese language newspapers in the process of women empowerment. An attempt has been made to discuss the status of gender inequality in Assam and to the role of the Assamese language newspapers in eradicating the gender inequality. Being an agent of mass media it can play a very decisive role in highlighting the issues of women apart from bringing positive changes among the minds of the people towards women.

The Assamese news papers can play a very pivotal role in highlighting the problems faced by women as the readership of Assamese news papers in Assam is more than the English news papers. It can throw light on the socio-economic and political status of women. It can also play an important role in influencing people as well as the policy makers.

The language press constitutes one of the most important media to reach millions of people at different parts of the state. Small newspapers coming out from small places in different Indian languages constitute an important segment of the Indian press. These language newspapers truly reflect the rich cultural heritage of India. The language newspapers have been able to establish affinity with the people of a particular region. Being an agent of mass media

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language press can play crucial role in a democratic country like India. The Assamese language press occupies an important place in the state. The history of Assamese print media is more than 160 years old. The journey was started with "Arunodoi". It was first published in January, 1846 from Sibsagar. At present more than 20 Assamese news papers (daily and weekly) are published from the capital city Guwahati and some are having multiple edition also. It has been found that language news papers are able to create large numbers of readers in the state. It can provide an important link between planners, bureaucracy and the people at the grass root level. Assamese language newspapers can be a very effective media for promoting women empowerment. In Assam the Assamese Language Press provides one of the most important media for reaching out the millions of rural people.

In a society where gender discrimination exists in almost every sphere, the role of mass media becomes more important to create public opinion on women issues.

Gender Inequality in India and Assam: "Women constitute about 50% of the country’s population. But they are largely excluded category in almost all respect. They have been denied of their rights and liberties by male dominated society for which their social economic and political status has remained relatively low.” (Bhuiyan 35). In India gender discrimination is found everywhere. It is to be noted that women in Assam are also facing gender based discrimination.

Although women are cause of men origin, but they have been exploited their rights by men and men dominating society. “Women belonging to all categories are doubly exploited, first for being women, and second for belonging to particular sections of society.” (Biswal, 2008)

Gender discrimination is a burning issue in India as well as in other countries. In India, Son gets more importance than daughter in every sphere of life. In many section of Indian society, boys have freedom to enjoy their rights but girls have to face many restriction made by men and men dominating society. “Apart from discriminatory restrictions of women’s fundamental freedoms such as voting, marriages, travel, testifying in court, inheriting and owning property and obtaining custody of children women find that their access to education, employment, health care and even food is limited because of their gender. Domestic violence affects women in every country in the world. According to the International Labor
Organization, women work almost double the time in the world than men, and they hold not even one-tenth of the property as against men." (ibid)

In the Global Gender Gap Index 2009, out of the 134 countries India is at the 114th position covered in the index. (The World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Index, 2009). Gender discrimination has become a curse for the women which prevent them from attaining desirable development and progress. In a male dominated society they have to struggle hard to come to the forefront. Gender based discrimination is a stumbling block on the way of the development of the women. Gender discrimination has become a curse for the women which prevent them from attaining desirable development and progress. In a male dominated society they have to struggle hard to come to the forefront. A vast majority of Indian women work throughout their lives but the fact is that it is not officially recognized. Statistics on work force shows low figure of women workers.

The Human Development Report of Assam, 2003, in one of its chapter entitled Women: Striving in an Unequal World "stated that the position of women in Assam is no different from that of women in other region of the country. In fact, in some respects, women in Assam are even more disadvantaged. Regarded as the 'second sex' and usually as not distinct from the families that they belong to, women have to face many challenges and hardships. Poverty, violence and lack of political participation have been identified as issues of special concern to South Asian women, and Assam is no exception" (HDR, Assam, 2003).

The system of dowry also highlights the status of women in the society. According to the report of Crime Record Bureau there were 5,513 dowry death cases registered in India in the year 1996. In Assam 99 dowry death cases were registered in 2005. Gender disparity in the sphere of education is another matter of concern. Despite of a number steps taken by the government the status of women education is lagging behind men.

According to a 1998 report by U.S. Department of Commerce, the chief barrier to female education in India are inadequate school facilities (such as sanitary facilities), shortage of female teachers and gender bias in curriculum (majority of the female characters being depicted as weak and helpless). "Illiteracy restricts one's capacity to give thoughtful judgment on issues of importance.
Education facilitates the development of a progressive attitude in individuals towards social and economic problems.” (Bhatt, 1967)

According to the census report 778,454,120 persons are literate in the country. The literacy rate of the country is 74.04. in India 444,203,762 males are literate with a literacy rate of 82.14%. On the other hand only 334,250,358 females are literate. The literacy rate of women in 2001 was 65.46%. In Assam the literacy rate of male is Male is 78.81 and the female literacy rate was 67.27. The number of total literate male in 2011 was 10,756,937. On the other hand there were only 8,750,080 literate females. (Census of India Report 2011)

Crime against women is another serious issue of concern. According to the National Crime Record Bureau Report 2005, a total of 1,55,553 cases of violence against women were registered in India including 18,359 cases of rape, 34,175 cases of molestation, 15750 cases of kidnapping, 6787 cases of dowry deaths and 58319 cases of torture. According to the latest report of the National Crime Record Bureau total 1700 cases of rape reported in Assam in 2011. National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) latest statistics revealed that Assam has become one of most vulnerable places in the country in terms of crime against woman. According to the latest NCRB figures, the rate of crime against women in Assam was the second highest in the country in 2011 with 36.9 per cent.

Socio-economic indicators are reflecting status of women in modern society. Indicators such as education, health, employment, land and legal rights etc are very important to empower any section of society. A person or group as much achieve the high level of these indicators believed to be empowered accordingly. According to Nobel Prize winner Dr. Amartya Sen, “Social opportunities refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, healthcare and so on, which influence the individuals' substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are important not only for the conduct of private lives (such as living a healthy life and avoiding morbidity and premature mortality), but also for more effective participation in economic and political activities.” (Sen, 2010)

Women Empowerment: Women empowerment means strengthening the condition of women socially, politically, economically and legally. It means equal opportunity in all walks of life to develop their potentialities. It also means to enlarge their choices for their own development. Empowerment generally refers to
increasing the socio-economic, political, religious status of individuals and communities.

"Empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideals of equality, human liberation and freedom for all" (Vyas, 2008). Women empowerment can be regarded as a process of making women self reliant, self sufficient, independent and capable of taking decisions for their own development. Women empowerment also means providing equal opportunity to women in all walks of life-social, economic, political, religious etc. "Women empowerment implies equality of opportunity and equality between genders, ethnic groups, social classes and age groups, strengthening of life chances, collective participation in different spheres of life-cultural, social, political, economic, development process, decision making etc." (ibid, p 15) Thus the scope of women empowerment is very vast in nature. It includes all the efforts and initiatives which aims at all round development of women. Women empowerment has become an important issue of discussion all over the world.

After independence there have a series of conscious initiatives to improve the status of women. A number of affirmative actions have been taken by the government to change the position of the women from inequality to that of equality. Both the Central and state governments have enacted different laws for women empowerment apart from setting up commissions to study the status of the women. The constitution of India provides equal status of equality to women with men. Thus legally, both women and men are equal in India. Women are free to take decisions for their own development. They are free to choose any form of education according to their preference to build their own career. But in reality there exist a big difference between theory and practice. The social reality is something different so far as the status of women is considered in the society. Only a few urban women are able to enjoy the fruits of constitutional and legal provisions related to equality, right, liberty and justice. Despite of the constitutional and legal provisions gender bias is still prevalent in most of the societies in our country. Although equality of status has been guaranteed to the women by the constitution, it is very unfortunate that they are still facing discrimination in the society.

**Importance of Media in women empowerment**: Media plays an important role in a democratic country. It is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. In the process of women empowerment media can play a very effective role by highlighting the issues of women. In
2001, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a policy document, National Policy for Empowerment of Women. The policy document stressed on the role of the media in the process of women empowerment. Recognizing the significance of mass media, the policy document states that "Media will be used to portray images consistent with human dignity of girls and women". The media is considered an important agent of power. Media plays an important part in the struggle for women’s empowerment.

Language newspapers can play an important role in setting agenda of the people. A number of researchers (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Cohen, 1963; Iyenger, 1979; Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Neumann, 1990; Smith, 1987) have found close correlation between the coverage of a particular issue by the newspapers and peoples’ perception on the importance of that issue. Agenda setting theory is basically a theory of strong media effects which suggests that with the passage of time the media agenda becomes the public agenda. According to Agenda Setting theory if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important. "Press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963).

Assamese newspapers as an agent of mass media can be very effective in this regard since it occupies a position of special privilege and eminence in the state, and its audience is substantially larger than that of the English or Hindi Newspapers. The Assamese newspapers can play a dominant role in setting women issues as public agenda by covering them on the front page since front page news are generally regarded as important news or issues.

It can create awareness among the people against Social evils like Dowry system, Civil marriage, witch hunting etc. Assamese language newspapers can be an effective instrument to break the orthodox thinking by creating a scientific temper among the people.

The process of women empowerment also demands development journalism on the part of the press. A number of legislative measures have been taken by the government to accelerate the process of women empowerment. It can create a healthy public opinion regarding the needs and means of women empowerment.

Talking about the Problems and Prospects of Small Newspapers on August 13, 2005 at Press Club Kolkata, Chairperson Press Council of India, Justice G.N. Ray, said, "To the founder of Indian Language Journalism also goes the credit for the close affinity
that the small press of today enjoys with the public to which it caters. Freedom struggle apart, the role that small and medium newspapers have played since 1947 is also commendable. The majority of Indian population today lives in rural areas. The need for flow of information to and from the rural area is even greater. The large and more well known papers are mostly published from large cities and towns, not fully aware of the needs and problems of the rural or small town public or of the local taste. Conversely, the small newspapers enjoy the potential to bridge this gap as though they are brought out by people with small means, it also translates into small overhead costs. They speak the language of the locals and are thus capable of influencing their opinion. They also have the potential to serve as a conduit between the public and the local authorities by bringing to the notice of the authorities, the sufferings, difficulties and the needs of the people, simultaneously carrying to the people the type of information they need from the authorities". (http://presscouncil.nic.in/speechpdf/speech4.htm)

It can create a platform where the government, NGO'S and others social organization can play their role in the process of women empowerment. It can act as a channel of communication between people, Govt., NGO'S and other Social organization, Press has a responsibility in providing a voice to the vulnerable groups but all these are not possible without introducing certain changes in favour of development reporting. **Media interventions can alter gender norms and promote women's empowerment.**

Public awareness campaign through newspapers can be effective for altering attitudes towards gender norms. A number of researchers have proved that mass media can inject new ideas among the people. A unique feature of the Assamese language press is the practice of publishing special supplements during special occasions such as Bihu, and Durga Puja etc. The special supplements carries shorts stories, poem, creative writings etc. These newspapers are closely related to the culture and feelings of the people. Assamese language newspapers have been able to create an emotional bond with the people of Assam. It is one of the prominent medium for disseminating information and knowledge on different subjects to the majority of population in Assam. Since Assamese language newspapers occupy important place in the society of Assam, as one of the important media of receiving information, it can serve very
effectively in disseminating information on education, nutrition, health etc.

Generally, women’s problems do not find a place on the front page of a newspaper unless it is a related to crime or a case of rape. Front page is regarded as the most important page of every newspaper. All major stories are placed on the front page. Front page is basically dominated by male. Newspapers even on women’s page does not usually address relevant issues for women empowerment but reporting is concerned with beauty tips recipes, fashion syndrome etc.

The Assamese newspapers can play a very pivotal role in highlighting the problems faced by women as the readership of Assamese newspapers in Assam is more than the English newspapers. It can throw light on the socio-economic and political status of women. It can also play an important role in influencing the policy makers.

It is well recognized by several researchers that the process of women empowerment demands equal treatment and coverage by the media. Therefore in this context the role of press becomes very important to inform educate and empower the women by setting certain roles. News papers are expected to fulfill its democratic functions by setting up certain standard. Assamese language newspapers can play an effective role in creating public opinion on women empowerment issues by covering them on front page. It can mobilize public opinion on different aspects of women’s empowerment. It can be very affective in generating public opinion by disseminating the issues of gender inequality, and role of women in development process etc. Government has taken a number of initiatives to eradicate women illiterate but still remaining due to the presence of orthodox attitude the literacy rate is low among the female in our country. It has the power to influence the attitude of the people which should be utilized to create positive attitude toward women. However, the reality is something different. Journalists and mass media practitioners have to take a pledge for speaking out to root out gender inequality.

If the language press works in collaboration with local NGOs and government agencies, it can have a decisive impact in ending violence against women and ensuring women’s empowerment in the truest sense of the term. When there is no violence, in whatsoever manifestations, heaven on earth would not be far away.
Assamese language newspapers which wields immense power in the state—a power which is only expanding and not diminishing, needs carrying out a focused attention about women-related issues and the portrayal of women. It can play a salutary and a liberating role to give to the women the distinctive and the exclusive space, which must belong to them to enable them, get equal status in the society.

Reference:
- National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 (http://wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm)
Press and Rural Development in India

Pawan Kr Tiwari *

The spread of education and the revolutionary changes in communication and information technologies have made media the most potent means of information in the present time. Media has become the most effective and dominant means of communication. Now-a-days media influences all works of our life -personal, social and professional. Rural development is need of the hour for a country like India, which is on the doorsill of becoming one of the big powers of the world. However, the country can not become a developed one without achieving rural development as India lives in villages. Media is regarded as a catalyst of change and development. In a democratic society like India media has a special role to play in the process of development by empowering weaker sections of the society.

Several researchers have found that mass media can play a pivotal role in the process of development. Uma Narula in her book "Development Communication, Theory and Practice has discussed about communication and development. According to J S Yadav (2007) because of the development in the new information and communication technologies mass media can play very effective role in the country. Daniel Lerner in 1958, while discussing the relation of development with that of any mass media said that: —"the greater the communication facilities, the greater or even faster is modernization." In a democratic country media play a very important role. "The mass media constitute the backbone of democracy". (Pravakar & Basu; 2007). In a democratic country the role of media becomes more important. Media is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. "The most important democratic functions include surveillance of socio-political development, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views, holding officials for the way they exercise power, provide incentives for citizens to learn choose and become involved in political process, and resist efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence". (Pravakar & Basu; 2007).

Communication plays a very important role in the process of development. Lerner (1958) in "The Passing of the Traditional Society" points out that the mass media were both index and agent of modernization.. Wilbur Schramm (1964) emphasized on the role of communication in the process of social change by saying that the development of mass media is one of the requisites for and signs of a modernising society. He noticed change in social, cultural, religious and personal attitudes which subsequently have helped change and shape a society completely different. Lakshman Rao (1966) studied the role played by the communication in economic, social and political development of a community. Press which is an important and powerful means of communication can play a very active role in development process.

Rural Development:

There is no universally accepted definition of rural development. The term rural development connotes overall development of rural areas to improve the quality of life of rural people. Rural Development is a multidimensional concept, which put emphasis on the development of agriculture and allied activities, village and cottage industries and crafts,

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socio-economic infrastructure, community services and facilities and, above all, human resources in rural areas. As a discipline, it is multi-disciplinary in nature, representing an intersection of agriculture, social, behavioural, engineering and management sciences. (Katar Singh 1999). "Rural development is a process of qualitative and quantitative changes to improve circumstances in rural region"(Swami, 2011)

Rural development is a continuous process which demands all round support from the government, NGO’S and the mass media. Since independence rural development is getting special attention in the 5 year plans. It has been one of the agenda of the policy makers and planners. In the process of rural development press has a vital role to play as an agent of social change.

The 2011 Census estimates that 69 percent of the country’s total population inhabits in villages.

In the Indian context rural development assumes greater significance as according to the 2011 Census report 83.3 crore people, about 69 percent of the country’s total population of 121 crore, continue to live in rural India. Most of the people living in rural areas draw their livelihood from agriculture and allied sectors (60.41 % of total work force). For achieving rural development, the present government has been injecting resources at a massive scale to the rural and farm sector.

Presently, seven major flagship programmes are being implemented to develop rural areas. They are: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRRLM), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) and Total Sanitation Campaign (TSP), Integrated Watershed Development Programme (IWDP), Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and Rural electrification, including separation of agricultural feeders and Rajiv Gandhi Gramin Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY). All these programmes are essentially meant for creating gainful employment opportunities and to improve the quality of lives of rural masses.

Despite implementing a number of programmes for creating gainful employment opportunities and to improve the quality of lives of rural masses, rural development continues to be a key policy challenge. Rural development essentially reflects in the improvements in the economic well being of people living in villages. In someway, it reflects in the increase in the purchasing power of the rural inhabitants.

Looking at the situation of India there is an urgent need of development journalism. Development journalism put more emphasis on development reporting, Development journalism is characterized by a sincere devotion to the developmental needs of the poor, marginalized and rural people. It rejects the news values followed by the western press. Development journalism demands a mission and vision on the part the press and the journalists.

In The handbook of journalism studies, Xu Xiaoge (2009) states "The whole point of development journalism is to engage and empower the people and to involve them actively in the process of economic, cultural and political development."

What It Can Do in Rural Development: As a catalyst of Social change the Press can be a decisive factor in promoting rural development in India. Near about 70% Population lives in villages. According to Eleventh National Development Plan the number of rural people in India amounts to more than 300 million. More than 1.1 billion people live below poverty line. It has been found that a large portion of poor people live in rural areas. There exists a wide gape between rural and urban India. Press should pay attention to the field of education.
Press and Rural Development in India

India where still more than 35% People are illiterate, Press should focus on the need of child education. Illiteracy is creating a big hurdle in the way of national development in general and rural development in particular. The Government of India has undertaken a number of initiatives like Sarvashahi Abhiyan, Mid day mill program to lure the rural and poor children's towards schools, to eradicate illiteracy from the country but presence of ignorance, unawareness and orthodox nature, people in the remote areas still do not show interest in sending their children's to the schools. It can create awareness among the people against Social evils like Dowry system, Civil marriage, witch hunting etc. Press can be an effective instrument to break the orthodox thinking by creating a scientific temper among the people. It can render health care services to the rural people by highlighting the need of health care. It should highlight the remedial measures to combat diseases. Rural people need information, encouragement and motivation to participate in the development activities. Establishment of National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development was an important step for the rural development. The main purpose of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development is to provide credit for the development of handicrafts, agriculture, small scaled industries, village industries, rural crafts, cottage industries, and other related economic operations in the rural sector. People in rural areas need to be informed about the facilities provided by this bank. Press can persuade and motivate people to participate in the development activities of the government. It has a great responsibility in making people aware about the developmental prospects and programmes of the Government. According to Kamla Bhasin (1984), “More frightening than the direct reach of media, however, is its indirect influence. By gradually shaping public opinion, personal beliefs and even people’s self-perception, media influences the process of socialization and shapes ideology and thinking.” (Quoted in Singh, 2001)

It can make people politically conscious. In rural areas peoples' participation is very less. It can launch a mass movement to combat poverty, un-employment, etc. It can make people conscious to contribute their role in the development process. Government has launched a number of policy and Programmed for the development of the rural communities but people are unable to get the fruits of these Schemes due to ignorance and lack of information.

It can highlight the problems of rural area by covering rural news. It can make policy makers and development planners informed about the needs and problems of rural areas. Thus it can be said that, press can constitute the backbone of rural development. It can bridge the information gap between urban and rural people. It can create a platform where the government, NGO'S and others social organization can play their developmental role. It can act as a channel of communication between people. Govt., NGO'S and other Social organization, Press has a responsibility in providing a voice to the rural people but all these are not possible without introducing certain changes in favour of development reporting. The Present Scenario: But a present time the role, nature and values of Indian Press has undergone several changes. A number of studies have been conducted on the content of newspapers which shows very negative results. Politics, celebrities' cricket and cinema are becoming the centre of focus in newspapers. The front page is generally devoted for politics, violence and others sensational news development issue are not covered properly. News papers mostly cover spicy stories. A deep analysis of new papers will highlight the urban bias in the content.

In the name of globalization the press in India has changed its news values. In order to compete with the foreign news papers and satellite news channels which are mostly controlled by MNC’S Indian news papers have kept aside the realities of Indian society. News
has become a product and their motive is to sale the product. News is selected not on basis of its social values but on the basis at its sale values.

In a democratic country like India Media is regarded as a fourth Pillar of Democracy. Mass media is expected to strengthen the Backbone of society. Press as an agent of Mass media can play an important role as a catalyst of rural development.

If we go back to the history of origin and growth of Journalism, we will find that Journalism in India was popularized and nurtured by patriot freedom fighter, Social reformers like Raja Ram Malan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak. They took Journalism as a mission. Social reform, development was their main motive. Indian freedom movement. At that time Journalism was taken as a means to swerve the People. Mahatma Gandhi has written in his autobiography, “The sole aims of Journalism should be service. The news papers a great Power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole country sides and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen service but to destroy. If the control is from without, It proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercise from within.”

What need to be done : Development reporting on themes likes unemployment, poverty, illiteracy development schemes et are the need of the hour. Shoudering the responsibility of rural development press should focus more and more on poor, weak and rural people instead of covering sex, Cinema, Celebrities and sensation. Making a departure from ‘man bites dog approach’ press should focus more and more emphasis on development news. The second press commission in its report says “The role of the press in a developing and adversary nor an ally of Government. To be a mindless adversary or an unquestionably would be to abdicate judgment of free press in our views should be a constructive critics.” The Second Press Commission also highlighted the need of following those news values which can help in the development of the nation.

No doubt a numbers of occasion press has played a great role and we can hope the press will contribute more and more in the process of development in general and rural development in particular. The role and importance of press is well emphasized by Pt Jawaharlal Nehru -who says,” The press is one of the vital organs of modern life. Especially in a democracy the press has tremendous powers and responsibilities. The press must be respected.’

As agent of mass media press can be a catalyst of rural development by acting as a friend, Philosophies and guide and positive critics of Govt. and Society. It can play a principal role in empowering rural communities. Press (National Press, Regional Press, and Language Press) provides one of the most important media for reaching out the millions of rural people. Development journalism as a channel of communication between rural people, policy makers, and government can be a vital instrument for promoting literacy, awareness leading towards rural development.

Reference :


Census Report 2011, Government of India

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