CHAPTER 1

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, directive principles etc. The constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to take special initiatives for the development of the women. From the Fifth Five Year Plan onward there has been marked shift in the approach to women’s issues from welfare to development. In recent year the government has taken several initiatives for the empowerment of the women. The empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. Empowerment of women even became one of the nine objectives of the Ninth Plan.

The Tenth Plan adopted the strategy of ‘Empowering women, as an agent of social change and development. In our country, women empowerment has received wide policy support over the years. India is also a signatory to several International Treaties and Conventions. One of the important Conventions impacting women is The International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which has been ratified by a majority of UN member. Since women’s empowerment is a global issue, UNO has also expressed concern in the matter. The charter of the United Nations declares equal dignity and worth of human person- all types of human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural. In 1993, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action proclaimed the rights of women and girl child as “Inalienable, integral and indivisible part- Priority objective of the international community.”(Vyas, 2008)

The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals.

In today’s world, women have attained levels of eminence and distinction, as educationists, doctors and technologists, contributing to the growth of the state. Unfortunately even in this 21st century women are not considered as equal partners in
development process. For them even today, asymmetry and inequity are unfortunately a fact of life. Despite their contribution, they are treated as inferior to men as a result they continue to be severely disadvantaged. The Human Development Report of Assam, 2003, in one of its chapter entitled Women: Striving in an Unequal World stated, “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).

Newspapers can play the role of a leader by highlighting the issues of the women and can offer solutions.

“The mass media constitute the backbone of democracy”. (Pravakar & Basu, 2007). 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”. (ibid).

Media can play an effective role in molding the opinion, attitude and behaviour of the people. 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.”

In 2001, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a policy document, National Policy for Empowerment of Women, with guidelines aiming to advocate women’s rights. 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 “Media will be used to portray images consistent with human dignity of girls and women. The Policy will specifically strive to remove demeaning,
degrading and negative conventional stereotypical images of women and violence against women.”

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing) also discussed on the need of balanced and positive portrayal of women in different mass media. It adopted certain strategic objectives. The Strategic objectives J.2. of the Beijing platform for Action deals with the portrayal of women in media.

Media can focus on these areas and share the experience with the government organizations working in this field. Media have a special responsibility in providing a platform to the government in chalking out the community specific development policy and programs and its implementation. The government has initiated a number of women specific plans and programs which demands an effective support and cooperation from none government organizations for their speedy and successful implementation.

In a democratic society, the mass media play a vital role in providing information, conducting propaganda, educating and enlightening people, strengthening national integration and accelerating social development. Mass media has the power to bring social changes. Mass media is regarded as one of the important and influential instruments of social change.

“Since media is one of the primary institutions which helps shape and influence opinion, it should take the lead in the process of change and interrogate its own practice and perceptions and build society that celebrates diversity and it's critical of inequality and marginalization”(Rawal, 2010)

According to Uma Singh, “The most damaging is the perpetuation of sex role stereotypes by media depicting women in domestic roles-cooking, working, cleaning. Women are hardly ever shown in more productive roles. On the other hand, men are shown as decision makers, authorities, and successful professionals. Thus an important development in society, the emergence of women on the work front has been marginalized.”

This study includes English as well as language newspapers. While English is more popular among the elite groups, language newspapers (Assamese, Bengali and Hindi) enjoy more infirmity with the rural and local people.
Assam is a multi-cultural-multi ethnic and multi religious state. Assamese is the main language of the majority of the people of the state. Assamese language newspapers have been able to occupy an eminent position in the state. English language newspapers constitute another important segment of press in Assam. Bengali speaking people constitute one of the majority groups in the state. Hindi speaking people forms another important section of the society. Keeping in mind the ethnic and lingual composition of the state the researcher selected 2 English, 2 Assamese 1 Bengali and 1 Hindi language newspapers as the sample. It was interesting to examine the function of English, Hindi, Assamese and Bengali newspapers in the rural areas of the state. These newspapers reach a remarkable number of people and we presume that their impact on the public opinion is wider than the English press'.

Powerful and influential groups of the society such as government officials, policy makers and educated intellectual class constitute the most important readers of the English newspapers in our country. On the other hand the language press occupies an important place in the country in terms of readership and reach. Large number of readership is an important power of the language press in the country. Thus both English and language newspapers can play a decisive role by highlighting the problems and issues, which are impeding the growth and development of the weaker section like women. To quote Ammu Joseph,"The power of English language press is further enhanced by its class competition. The same dominant group to which it primarily caters runs it. This is an important consideration in assessing the media coverage because the nature of the press determines what constitutes "news" to a great extent. The traditional definitions of news conform to the generally liberal, yet elitist values espoused by the relatively affluent, university-educated, upper caste urban".

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 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
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”(Press Council)

(https://presscouncil.nic.in/speechpdf/speech4.htm)

Contrary to popular perception that TV has overtaken newspapers, the Indian
Readership Survey finds the reach of print media has been expanding.

Media has “enormous power to change and shape attitudes and to influence
socialisation processes”. (Venkatram: 2003). Therefore in this context the role of
press becomes very important to inform educate and empower the women by
highlighting the issues of gender inequality. With this background the study is
undertaken to study and analyze the extent, frequency and nature of the coverage of
issues related to women empowerment by six daily newspapers of Guwahati city of
Assam.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Media is one of the most important instruments in raising awareness about the need
for achieving gender equality and improving women's position in society. In this
case, analyzing the coverage of women empowerment issues by the regional
dailies is worth mentioning. Media plays an important part in the struggle for
women's empowerment. UNESCO acknowledges media's crucial role in the gender
equality process. Within the project “Women make the news” UNESCO stresses “the
importance of having a balanced and fair representation of both women and men in
the media as well as diversity of voices and opinions in order for the media to
complete their democratic responsibility” (United Nations, Women Makes the News)

Mass media acts as a mediator between the common people and the government. It
transforms knowledge and information from policy makers to the general people. The
press (i.e., newspapers) being the pioneer among the mass media has always received
attention in the socio economic development in the country. Press has a pivotal role to play in the society as it directly influences the people.

There is a common perception among the intellectuals, social scientists and women activists that women issues are not given due coverage by the press. The national, regional and local newspapers are no exception here. If we look at the socio-economic and political status of women in our country it will become very clear that women are not getting equal status with men in almost every walk of life. Women constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in almost every society. The problems and actual conditions of women are not being reflected in the media. Gender based inequalities still prevails in our society which is a stumbling block on the way of women empowerment.

Empowerment of women, also called gender empowerment, has become a significant topic of discussion in regards to development in every aspect. Entire nations, businesses, communities, and groups can be benefited from the implementation of programs and policies that adopt the notion of women empowerment. Women empowerment has become one of the important issues in the present time.

Media coverage of issues related to women has been a source of contention and debate since the earlier days of Indian press and still continues to be a major issue in India. Since press is one of the important agents of mass media it is interesting to know the coverage of issues related to women empowerment by the press. This study is designed to study the nature extent and frequency of the coverage of women empowerment issues by six regional daily newspapers of Guwahati city of Assam. The study also includes an interview schedule to know the opinion of the respondents (selected readers) of the selected newspapers on the role of the newspapers in women empowerment process and the coverage of women issues in the newspapers.

THEORITICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Agenda Setting theory, when the media frequently highlight certain issues, people will think that those issues are more important than others. If the press highlights issues related to women empowerment, this will have an impact on the audience, and can change people's mindsets on these matters.
As a catalyst of change mass media can play an important role in setting the agenda of the people. A number of researchers (McCombs and Shaw 1972, Cohen, 1963, Iyengar, 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).

To put it simply, the mass media influence and affect the values, attitudes and lifestyle of people. The mass media teach and the teachings have a cumulative effect. They guide us in establishing, extending or displacing meanings, mold our approvals and disapprovals and steer/stimulate us to reinforce or replace our value systems.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY OF PRESS

According to the social responsibility theory, the press should consider the overall needs of society when making journalistic decisions in order to produce the greatest good. This theory put emphasis on responsibility of the press towards society. “Regardless of whether government-imposed public interest obligations are constitutional, the broadcast media, like the print media, have an ethical obligation to serve the public interest and make a positive contribution to the democratic process” (Napoli, 2001).

DEVELOPMENT JOURNALIST

Mass media has a pivotal role to play in the development process. A number of development theories have proved that mass media play an important role in development process. The media is regarded as the ‘fourth –estate’. Denis MCQuail (2005) advocated the power of mass media in mass dissemination of news, mass mobilization of people for good cause or bad ones, and for promotion of democratic participation. Issues of women’s empowerment are an important part of the field of development journalism.
Mass media is also regarded as the Watchdog. Anybody who threatens democracy, freedom of speech, the basic rights of the people, should be attacked by the watchdog (Scheupp, 2000). Thus media has a great responsibility in the society.

Development journalism aims at giving voice to the voiceless. The main source of information in development journalism is the poor, the rural, the weak, and the marginalized people. The Second Press commission of India (1982) stated, “Development reporting should tell the story of what is going wrong. The press should investigate the reasons for success as well as failure of various development programmes affecting the lives of common people at different places under different conditions”.

Vilanilam (1975) defines development journalism as “Journalism that deals with the process of development in developing nations”

In The handbook of journalism studies, Xu Xiaoge 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.”

Shelton Guneratne argues that development journalism involves analytical interpretation, subtle investigation, constructive and sincere criticism, and direct associated with the grassroots rather than with elite (Gunaratne, 1980). It has been observed that development reporting has not gain momentum in India. According to Bhattachargee (1994) following are the causes of backwardness of development reporting in Indian newspapers-

- Inadequate information and poor understanding of the subject of development among practicing journalists.
- Poor interest in development reporting.
- Lack of fund and support from the newspapers establishments.

This study also aims to place women's empowerment issues in a development context. Issues of women's empowerment are an important part of the field of development journalism.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study was conducted to look at the portrayal of women and women’s issues in the print media. Manju Kak was the project director of the project. It was a comparative study of the kinds of articles featured in the regional and national press, to elicit issues that are common and to find out those that are not. Identification of regional and national level concerns was also one of the key issues.

The main objective of the Comparative Study was the portrayal of women in print media. The study also tried to elicit best practices of sustainable development, consensus building, and conflict resolution amongst women and feed these stories where possible to the press to promote women’s positive contribution to the society.

The study concentrated on issues emerging in the states of Jammu & Kashmir (conflict & consensus), Uttaranchal (development & ecology), Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand (Consensus building & conflict resolution in tribal societies), Uttar Pradesh (rural & urban). The states have been chosen are with a view to keep a focus on mountain and tribal societies. Specifically, the role of women in these societies has provided particular solutions to both sustainable development and to harmonious living through traditional methods of consensus building. It was found that newspaper publishers know the importance of retaining the confidence of the less privileged sections. They must be seen to be sensitive to the problems of the rural and urban working classes and all those who go by the name of the exploited. Large regiments of correspondents and reporters are engaged to cover the doings of the various strands of common people that make up the community. They place considerable emphasis on what we call human-interest stories.

The study concluded that women’s development needs are not yet being projected in the press of the five states they studied. However, it was observed that the newspapers acknowledge the importance of the women reader. Regional papers in producing women’s supplements have made a small beginning, and the effort should be to steer those supplements towards more meaningful themes. They recommended, “The organization of workshops for media-persons must continue, perhaps with some method of follow up. Gender-sensitive people in the newsroom should push for what are called ‘soft’ issues to be put on the first page of their newspaper, and more of them should raise their voice against the meaningless political power play that usually
finds a place there.”

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is the world’s longest running and most extensive research on gender in the news media. It is a worldwide survey on the representation of women in the world’s media that is carried out every five years. It is a one-day study executed by volunteers from women's rights organizations, media associations and academies in 76 countries, analysing and comparing data from print media, television and radio. According to the report of GMMP 2005 only 21% people in the world news were women. Women are not considered as news worthy by the media.

The result of the 2010 GMMP-project shows that women constituted only 24% of the news subjects in the world news, people who were heard or read about in the news. The figure for India was 22%. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is the world’s longest running and most extensive research on gender in the news media. India was among the 100 plus countries across the world where groups of volunteers participated in the Fourth Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), monitoring a cross-section of news media on a single, pre-determined day: 10 November 2009. The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI), a professional association linking women journalists and other women working in or on the media across the country, coordinated the GMMP 2010 process in India. Women constituted less than a quarter (22 per cent) of the people heard or read about in the news (i.e., as news subjects) across all topic categories. The corresponding global figure for news subjects – people who are interviewed or whom the news is about – was 24 per cent. Across Asia the corresponding figure was 20 per cent. (Global Media Monitoring Project 2010)

In 2000 the Association of Women Journalists (AFJ) studied news coverage of women and women’s issues in 70 countries. It reported that only 18 per cent of stories quote women, and that the number of women-related stories came to barely 10 per cent of total news coverage. (Association of Women Journalists, 2000)

“Women in the Indian Print-Portrayal and Performance” is an excellent book by Rama Jha (1992). In this book Jha analyses women professionals in journalism and the changing portrayal of women in the print media. Jha claims that women activists were largely responsible for enhanced media coverage of women’s issues. She writes, “the continuing male bias that conditions news content and news analysis and also the
positioning of the news in the paper. What is also lamented most by women journalists themselves is the apathy”. Talking about the portrayal of women in media she writes, “the picture that emerges of Indian women as portrayed in the print media is not adequate and not without its set of cultural biases. It is reassuring that it is not a depressing scenario any more. The cultural biases in media in general will take time to completely vanish”.

She recommended that a broad national policy should be chalked out which can provide rough media norms. She writes, “Not that one is asking for any code of conduct within newspaper network. Self-restraint is a must, particularly on women’s issues. Otherwise there is a danger to sensationalizing reports on atrocities. Atrocities are atrocious enough. What is needed is a cool, objective, factual, hard look at these, so that the subversion of women’s interests that goes on in the male dominated press does not occur”.

Venkatram (2003) conducted a study entitled: Women in Print – the change over the last half-century in reporting on women and gender issues by Indian newspapers. The study was conducted on a random selection of 84 national and region-specific newspapers over three time periods: the early Fifties, the mid-Seventies and 2000-2001. Both news material and features were included in the study. The result shows that women make Page One news mostly as victims; for example when murder or rape is committed. Women politicians are the second largest category. The findings of the study also show that women get rare coverage on business and edit pages. The study shows that out of the stories appeared on the front page in 2001-2002, only 6.9 % mentioned women. He writes, “Page One in Indian newspapers is still a male preserve. Women makes front page news mostly as victims.”

Dasgupta (1976) in her study of women’s issues in four English dailies published in New Delhi in 1975, observed that women’s issues received no attention in the six subject categories: social, economic, political, art and culture, biographical and other issues. However the study did not elaborate the methodology adapted for the study.

Bhatnagar’s study (1966) of women’s issues in six English newspapers published in New-Delhi in 1987 indicated that only 280 (1%) items in the sample reported about the problems and welfare activities about women. Important items like women’s education; rights and wage rates of women’s workers did not receive adequate
coverage in any of the newspapers under study.

Some of the other studies have also concluded that women are mostly projected as passive victims in the news media (Rakow and Kranich, 1991; Bailey, 1994).

“Crime news, compared to news of other non-violent events, is vastly overrepresented by newspapers and television news in the United States and many other countries” (Marsh, 1991).

In a study entitled ‘Woman, Democracy and the Media’: Cultural and Political Representation in the Indian Press, Sonia Bathla (1998) writes ‘Women issues are predominantly event oriented in the press coverage. Further, a major percentage of news stories focused on violent of the crime’. Bathla argued that ‘such stories may not be carried because of any sensitivity towards women; rather they fit neatly the media’s routinisation and are easy to obtain from regular sources’. In her study she stands back from a media centric approach and analysed the media’s coverage of women news/issues and the women’s movements within brother socio-cultural and political scenario in the Indian society. Her study was based on empirical data derived from an analysis of news and interviews with Indian journalist and women activities. She noticed ‘marginalization of women’s issues is the result of lack of general interest in the women’s question and individual preferences of journalist’.

The Indian journalists Kampala Sharma and Ammu Joseph carried out a study on how the Indian press reported on five gender issues between 1979 and 1988. Rather than examine the coverage of all the issues concerning women, they decided to focus on five landmark issues concerning women. They decided to examine four of these five issues-dowry deaths; rape, sex determination test, and sati because the women’s movement had drawn national attention to them. The fifth issue-the Shah Bano controversy was included in the study because it came into national focus because of its religious and political dimension. They examined the coverage given the newspapers and magazines to these five women’s issues that attracted media attention over a period of ten years. (Joseph and Sharma, 2006)

In 2006, the authors published a revised edition of the study, which looked at how these same issues were addressed by the print media in the first years of the new millennium. The issues were dowry deaths, rape, sex determination tests, sati (ibid).
(widow burning) and the Shah Bano controversy.

The issue that received most coverage was sati. Shah Bano controversy got second highest coverage after Sati. The Shah Bano controversy came into national focus because of the issue's religious and political dimensions and the question of having different civil codes for different religions.

Issues of dowry deaths and rape were given almost equal coverage. They observed a visible change in the reporting on dowry issues could be seen in the following years. They concluded the coverage of harassments and violence incidents increased because of the complain of the women’s group against these incidents.

In their earliest study, Joseph and Sharma found that the question of sex selection and female foeticide received the least attention among the five issues examined. They claimed that this was because sex selection is not an event, but the consequence of a process comprising various elements of gender inequality: women's status in general, women's rights to inherit property, etc. (ibid) The follow-up of the study showed that the print media took up the issue to a greater extent in this past decade. According to the authors, this was because of a census carried out in 2001 that showed a declining sex ratio in the country.

Joseph and Sharma found that events and issues involving politics, economics, law, and religion -in that order- were those topics considered most newsworthy. The Shah Bano controversy had such an impact on the press mainly because it was viewed as a legal, religious and political question rather than as a women's issue. (Ibid)

The authors point out that events rather than processes are considered newsworthy. They mean that this is why the Shah Bano controversy and the sati issue earned much wider coverage than any of the other five issues in the study. (Ibid) Issues concerning women's work, health, position in society and experiences within the family are less covered. Joseph and Sharma state that when such issues became news, it was because they were referred to by traditional sources such as the Government, the police, the Parliament, courts, international organisations, etc. (ibid)

They concluded ‘Although the press has played a significant role in publicizing issues which readily confirm to the traditional definitions of news worthiness, are the equally important women’s issues that are less ‘newsy’ continue to be marginalized.'
‘Missing half the story- Journalism As If Gender Matters’ which is edited by Kalpana Sharma (2010), a renowned journalist emphasize on the ‘genderisation’ of journalism. This book talks about a gender perspective in covering and reporting news stories.

Margaret Gallagher is a renowned Gender and Media researcher. He has concluded, “Issues that are particularly central in women’s lives come low down in the scale of what is regarded newsworthy. At best, they may become ‘news’ in coverage around a particular event such as Women’s Day”. (Gallagher, 2002)

He writes, “The very fundamental nature of this vision means that women’s portrayal in the media will not be improved by increasing the number of women journalists, or by getting rid of the worst excesses of sexism in advertising. What it actually requires is a social and political transformation, in which women’s rights – and women’s right to communicate – are truly understood, respected and implemented both in society at large and by the media.”

Gallagher argues that the media content still manifests a “masculine vision of the world” and that this will not change simply by increasing the number of women journalists or fighting sexism in advertising. Women's rights need to be a natural part both of the mass media and the society.(ibid)

The Committee on the Status of Women (1975) analysed the status of women in mass media and stated, “The content of communication at any given time reflects the pattern of values of the society. The ways subjects dealing with women are treated indicate to great extent the prevailing attitude of that society towards its women. Compared to men, women are underprivileged in many ways and suffer from serious disabilities. Since formal education is a costly and long-term process it is essential to harness the mass media. However, incidental studies on the impact of the mass media indicate that, women’s exposure to the media is often marginal and unsatisfactory. It appears that the mass media has not been an effective instrument to inform and prepare women to play their new role in society. The committee’s investigations indicate a general lack of awareness of about the rights, problems, opportunities and responsibilities among both men and women. Since government controls a significant section of the mass media it should set the pace”.

After an analysis of research materials on portrayal of women in different mass media
viz-television, advertising, cinema, radio and newspaper, Ceulemans and Fauconnier have concluded that “The evidence presented in the currently available literature on women and media indicates that media images tend to define woman within the narrow confines of her traditional domestic roles and her sexual appeal to man. (Ceulemans and Fauconnier, Mass Media: The Image, Role, and Social Conditions of Women, A collection and analysis of research materials). They wrote, “Newspaper images of woman define her in terms of her relationships to men. They emphasize her maternal and marital roles, and her function as a sexual object for male perusal. Women make news by virtue of their thus defined "femininity", or are assigned traditionally female traits when they appear in the news in non-traditional capacities, e.g. as politician, Professional, activist, sports figure, etc.”

Urvashi Dev Rawal writes, “All media institutions should have a gender policy....More space in media needs to be allocated to issue related to women. But this should not focus only on areas that are considered as ‘women’s issues’ but highlights success stories and portray women as significant contributors to society as leaders, workers and thinkers.”

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