Chapter 4

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN: THE SCENARIO IN INDIA, ASSAM AND BARAK VALLEY (A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS)
4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the present chapter, we have attempted to analyse the female work participation in Assam on the basis of secondary data and also to examine the structure of the labour market on the basis of gender. This could give us a broad idea of the participation of women of Assam with respect to the country as a whole in the labour market. For this purpose we have utilized the census data and also reports of various NSS rounds to make this study meaningful.

Women in Assam constitute almost 48% of the total population with almost 21.61% of the female population working according to 1991 census. Majority of the population are engaged in the informal sector and therefore are subjected to the discrepancies, which exists
in the labour market. Traditional handicrafts, like weaving and bamboo works occupy a prominent place next to agriculture. In Barak Valley the impact of the developmental activities on women during the post-independence period is significant. The role and status of women in Barak Valley have undergone notable changes with improvement in literacy and awareness that comes with development and change in the social and economic life. Yet inequality of status persists in different aspects of economic, social and family life. Inadequate employment opportunities compel women to concentrate in the unorganised sector and women lag behind men in employment in salaried jobs and in sectors, which involves decision-making and exercising power.

The worker population ratio (Appendix 3, Table 1 & Fig. 1) presents a broad picture of the trend of female work participation vis-à-vis male and total work participation rate in India as a whole and with urban rural division. This is based on census and NSS reports. From the table it is evident that there has been a decline in the Female Work Participation Rate (henceforth termed as FWPR) with the lowest recorded (13.9%) in the year 1971 census and marginally rising by 19.8% and 22.3% during 1981 and 1991 census. As compared to the FWPR, Male Work Participation Rate (henceforth termed as MWPR) has also been declining over the years with a slight variation in the year 1961 where both FWPR and MWPR has risen by 28.0% and 57.1% respectively. Though it has been argued that the
1961 census had reported to indicate the highest growth of WPR and the case of the subsequent decline could be attributed to several factors such as the rising school attendance ratios and the associated classification of children in the age group 5-14 as non-workers rather than workers. (Visaria, 1999).

However, taking these figures alone, arriving at definite conclusions would be misleading. This is because of changes in the concept of the definition of workers in the different censuses. These changes have been discussed in detail in the appendix section of the text. However, the changes in the definitional aspect, resulting to the change in overall aspect indicate the following:

- The Female Work Participation Rate in India is far behind that of males for the entire period of our analysis irrespective of the definition of workers.
- The participation rate for both female and male is increasing over the years.
- As regards the 1971 and 1981 censuses there was a considerable concern about the undercount of female workers. And hence 1991 census was redefined to include ‘unpaid workers’. In spite of these changes FWPR according to 1991 census showed only a marginal increase.

To overcome the incompatibility of the census reports, a comparison with the NSS reports on work participation rate has been made. While the census reports show that the FWPR registered a fall
of 14% in 1971 and a rise of 20.5% in 1981 and 22% in the 1991 census, male participation rate also varied between 1972-73 and 1993-94. FWPR has been more or less stable around 28% in India. This may perhaps be due to inclusion of marginal and subsidiary workers in the estimation of FWPR. As female constitutes a larger share of marginal workers, their WPR might have shown an increase, without in any way implying an improvement in their condition in the labour market.

Before we examine the general trend of WPR of India, Assam and Barak Valley, it is necessary for us to define the term “worker” irrespective of gender differences. A worker is defined as a person who participates in any economically productive activity, which could be either physical or mental in nature. The work involves not only actual work but also effective supervision and direction of work. An understanding of the Table 2 (Appendix 3) indicates that during the period from 1951 to 1961 the percentage of total workers has increased with an annual growth of 0.96 %. The WPR of total workers decreased during 1971 from 42.99% in 1961 to 32.91% in 1971 and again gathering momentum during 1991 where the WPR increased to 37.46% during the same period. The decline in the participation of total workers as well in the WPR in the 1971 census is due to the definition of workers, which was more restrictive in its approach. The 1971 definition included only such persons in the category of workers whose main activity was economically productive work. As a result
households and students who also have been participating in economic activity for a minor part of their time got excluded from the definition of labour force. This definitional change had affected the workers in general but the effect was felt more among the women than men. From the table showing the total workers, it further follows that there has been an increase in the proportion of total workers throughout India, Assam and Barak Valley and this could be due to an absolute increase in the number of male and female workers in all the three areas respectively. Increase in female workers during this period may be accounted for a growth in the literacy rate between the period 1951 and 1991, and this is followed with a similar improvement in Assam and Barak Valley, and also due to a greater social awareness among the people to seek monetary value for the services rendered.

A further analysis of the male and female distribution of Work Participation Rate (WPR) shows that the percentage of economically active male population has shown a varying trend. In India with the highest WPR recorded in the year 1961 and again showing a fall in the year 1971 is perhaps due to changes in the definitional concept of work. The 1961 census defines a person to be in the labour force if he or she had been engaged in economic activity for a greater part of the past season. On the other hand the 1971 definition is more rigorous including only those persons as workers whose main activity in the reference year was economically meaningful work.
Examining the FWPR trend, it has been observed that FWPR for the country as a whole has been showing a declining trend throughout the period of our analysis. FWPR is found to be very poor (22.05%) compared to MWPR (51.08%) in the 1991 census. Thus, the position of women workers and their participation in productive activity is far below the participation rate of men leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and marginalisation, change of definition of worker notwithstanding.

Female population constitute a strong force in Assam and the proportion of female workers in work participation shows an improving trend like the rest of India but reveals a declining trend during 1971 which could be attributed to the definitional change of 'workers'. The latest census reveals that FWPR in Assam is comparable to FWPR in India. The FWPR, according to 1991 census is 21.61% as against 22.05% in India for the same period. Correspondingly male WPR in Assam during 1991 census was 49.44% as against 51.08 % in India.

With reference to 1971 census, the rise in FWPR during 1991 could be due to an increase in the rural participation rate in the state of Assam (FWPR at 23.3% with a growth rate of 8.22%) as against 26.7% in India. Urban FWPR is only 7.5% as against 9.2% in India. Rural urban details have been tabulated in Table 3 (Appendix 3).

The total FWPR of Barak Valley of South Assam although lags far behind India and Assam, has also shown an improving trend outpacing the rate of growth of female population
(Appendix 3, Table 4). The percentage of total workers has shown a steady rise, with the district of Cachar registering the highest FWPR. A comparison of FWPR of the 1991 census with the 1961 census shows that in percentage terms, the FWPR has improved from a negative growth rate to a positive growth (Appendix 3, Table 2). FWPR has significantly increased in the valley from 4.93% in 1971 to 11.38% in 1991 with the largest concentration of the Female Work Participation Rate in Cachar district (13.08%) followed by Hailakandi (11.97%) and Karimganj (8.6%) during 1991. The growth rate of FWPR has widely varied among the districts varying between 3.90% (minimum) for Cachar, 5.52% (maximum) for Hailakandi and 4.29% in Karimganj in between according to the 1991 census. However, except this recent rise in FWPR, which as explained earlier, is perhaps due to definitional change. The overall growth rate of WPR has lagged behind the rising growth of population throughout the period since 1951.

In the overall analysis the following facts emerged:

- The FWPR is much lower than the MWPR in India and the same trend follows also in the state of Assam and Barak Valley as a whole.
- The overall FWPR is always found to be better in India and Assam compared to Barak Valley and its three districts, viz., Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi.
• The annual growth rate of FWPR during the census of 1991 with respect to earlier census is found to be much better, both in India and Assam compared to Barak Valley and its three districts indicating that the position of women in entire Barak Valley needs to be improved in the labour market and also a large section of the women population can be actively involved in various productive activities.

• Another feature reveals that although annual growth rate, both for male and female participation, has shown a varying trend during the period of our analysis in India, Assam and Barak Valley but there has been a discernible trend towards a decline in the WPR of both male and female as revealed by 1991 census with reference to 1951 census. The decline in the growth rate of MWPR happens to be more or less uniform and gradual (except during 1961 for Assam) but the growth rate of FWPR has been showing an upward move during 1991. Though this could again be mainly attributed to changes in the definitional concept of FWPR in the census, women's frequent entry and exit as well as re-entry may also distort the real picture of female participation rates.

4.2 OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF WORKERS

A comparison of the occupational distribution of workers reveals that while the number of male workers have been rising both
in India and Assam, the largest concentration of female workers has been in the primary sector for both India and Assam. The rest of the workers are unevenly spread between secondary and tertiary sectors, though the percentage of female workers in the primary sector has been higher for India than Assam (Appendix 3, Table 5). The 1991 census shows that the percentage of female workers has increased in the primary sector in Assam as compared to India. The decline in the FWPR in primary sector in India may be due to the increase in agricultural productivity or a decline in the cultivated area. Further it may be added that various promotional government schemes have led to the diversification of economic activities at the all India level in the rural areas causing a decline in the primary sector. But such schemes have failed to take shape in Assam. This may be responsible for a continuous increase of female participation in the primary sector. The diversification of workforce in the secondary sector has been looked upon as a major structural shift. The 50\textsuperscript{th} round of NSS (1993-94) also indicates the same trend. In Assam, the dominance of FWPR in the primary sector may be due the lack of opportunities in the organised sectors and the absence of employment opportunities in other alternative sectors. This is revealed in the Appendix 3 (Table 5).

The proportion of female workers in the secondary sectors has also shown a decline from 15.52% in 1961 census to 3.34% in 1991 at the all Assam level. In contrast, secondary sector in India has shown a near steady growth. However, in Assam an increase is observed in
the tertiary sector from 3.38% to 10.26% during the corresponding period, which is nearly comparable to tertiary sector in India.

The distribution of female workers in different industrial sectors, as revealed by available data in Appendix 3 (Table 5), further reveals that while the share of female workers engaged in agriculture and allied activities has declined in India, the participation rate in Assam has increased over the years. The reasons are the obsolescence of many non-agricultural occupations dominated by women and the movements of men into mechanised jobs that have replaced these jobs (David, 1996). Barak Valley as a whole and the district of Karimganj have registered a fall in the share of women workers in agriculture and allied jobs according to the 1991 census and the percentages have slightly decreased both in Cachar and Hailakandi districts. But due to the slow pace of industrialisation in the valley as well as in Assam, and with the number of job seekers in the state increasing yearly (12.84 lakh at the end of 1996 to 14.96 lakh in June 1997 (Appendix 3, Table 6), the situation has not been very conducive for women workers. Consequently they have no choice but to seek alternative source of occupation in the agricultural sector. For Assam, the increase in the proportion of women workers in the primary sector indicates that the option of diversification to non-agricultural employment is increasingly limited for women. Similarly the workers' share in the service sectors is comparatively smaller than their share in the industrial sector as well as in the agriculture sector in Assam.
This indicates that the expansion of avenues in paid and secured employment is not shared equally among men and women in the state as well as in Barak Valley, which is much more economically backward than the state as a whole. Female workers constitute a large percentage of the illiterate workforce and this could be one of the many reasons accounting for their low participation in the service sectors for the state and the country as a whole. Again the concentration of women workers in the informal sector occupations is not due to their choice but because there exists no other alternative opportunities of employment for them.

4.3 RURAL – URBAN DISTRIBUTION OF FWPR : A COMPARISON

Table 3 in Appendix 3 attempts to highlight the rural-urban differences in the WPR among males and females as estimated by the decennial census conducted during 1951-1991. For entire India, the urban female WPR, which is merely 9.2% in the 1991 census, has been considerably lower than the rural FWPR of 26.7% for the same period. This may be due to the difficulty in combining work with other household and other urban duties in urban areas. In contrast in rural areas work on the family farm or in the family enterprises constitute the main activity, leading to a rise in WPR. Moreover, in rural areas unmarried girls, young wives, busy mothers as well as older women are being forced by difficult economic situations to seek some kind of employment. In such a condition of survival, work opportunities are
uppermost in their mind and this enables them to detach themselves from the social stigma attached to work in the field. As a result FWPR in the rural areas is much higher than the participation rate in the urban areas in India, Assam and Barak Valley. Comparatively in India, MWPR in rural areas is higher than the MWPR of urban areas whereas for Assam reverse trend is observed. MWPR moreover has shown either a decline or maintained the same growth after 1961 census whereas FWPR, which showed a decline in the 1971 census with reference to 1961 census, has shown a considerable increase in the subsequent censuses. However, in all the cases FWPR always remains much below compared to the MWPR in both urban and rural areas.

In recent years men have been increasingly moving to the urban sectors in search of job opportunities, mainly due to low productive manual work of cultivation in rural area. These jobs are left to be done by their womenfolk leading to a rise in rural FWPR. This is one of the crucial factors responsible for feminization of agriculture. This in no way means that position of rural women workers has improved, since it is only due to a fall in the relative returns to agricultural labour. This is evident from the fact, since it is revealed that share of agricultural and allied activities of GDP has declined from 52% in 1951 to 29% in 1991, whereas the share of workforce has only declined from 73% to 65% during the corresponding period. This has resulted in a fall of marginal productivity of agricultural
labourers and a similar decline in wage rate. As a result male workers, who had at one time flocked this sector, have started moving from this sector leaving it to their female counterparts.

Studies also revealed that there was a rapid expansion in public activities particularly in the health and rural welfare services during the eighties in the rural sector. Women have been the chief beneficiaries of those activities, which might also be another factor responsible for rising level of FWPR in rural areas. Post reform period has also witnessed diversion of land from food crops to cultivation on a much larger scale to non-food crops like floriculture, horticulture or even pisciculture, all of which employ a growing number of female workers. This trend may therefore be another reason leading to a rise in FWPR in the rural sector. Other notable features that have been observed is that (i) MWPR has been maintaining the near zero or even slight negative growth rate in both urban and rural areas and (ii), an improvement of FWPR in the urban area from 6.6% to 9.2% and 15.5% to 26.7% in rural areas between 1971 and 1991 could also mean a better coverage of women workers in the census reports.

In Assam and Barak Valley, the growth rate of FWPR like the rest of India is found to be increasing at a better pace in the rural area than the growth rate in the urban area when compared between 1971 and 1991 (Appendix 3, Table 3). This implies that a large number of women are engaged in agriculture and allied activities, which are
subject to discriminatory wages. The factors operating at the all India level leading to this trend of FWPR in the labour market may also be operative in this region. It has also to be noted further that the handloom and sericulture sectors, which were predominantly household activities are now becoming highly commercialised. This has necessitated employing larger number of labourers in these household activities at a wage rate, expressing their preferences for female labourers. For women this dependency poses additional problem because this sector of the economy is largely characterised by irregularities of jobs, seasonal nature of work and with no fixed hours of work. In this case, burden of women is immense as work in this sector is often combined with full time household work. In the urban sector male participation has recorded a slight increase during the two census periods of 1971 and 1981 implying that there has been a gradual shifting of male workers from the rural to urban sectors leaving the female workers to survive under conditions of discriminatory wages. The economy of Assam being primarily agrarian, majority of the women workforce is still concentrated in agriculture and allied activities. Paddy being the principal crop requires and employs more women for sowing, transplanting and harvesting (62.99% in 1991 census).

Data relating to urbanisation and structure of occupation in urban areas reflects the slow growth of economic development in the valley. Urban population according to 1991 census comprises only
8.6% of the population against all India level of 25.7%. In absence of urban development, absorption of labour force from the rural sector is very low. This perhaps could explain the heavy concentration of workers in the rural sector and female labour force faced with the lack of educational skill and knowledge, horizontal mobility, often has to fend themselves as marginal workers with low pay structure and remain being underpaid. One reason for the high concentration of the marginal workers in Karimganj and Hailakandi could also be due to migration of men folk to work outside their villages and districts.

4.4 EMPLOYMENT IN THE ORGANIZED SECTOR

Organised sector is the sector which provides regular wages, assured jobs, where the terms and conditions of jobs are regulated strictly within the framework of the labour laws and are enacted to regulate the working hours, working conditions, wages and benefits of the workers. Any tendency of exploitation of the employees by the employers is thus prevented.

A look at the data of organised sector (Appendix 3, Table 7) for the period December 1990 to December 1996 in India reveals that the proportion of male employment in the public sector and private sector is much higher than the female employment in both the sectors throughout the period. The table shows that comparatively public sector has been able to provide the larger quantum of employment both to men and women in comparison to the private sector but in
recent years both for male and female, the rate of growth of employment in private sector is increasing compared to the growth in the public sector. The growth is found to be very minimal particularly in public sector which has registered a near zero/negative growth for male with female registering a stagnant growth. The steady rise in female employment in both the sectors although encouraging, the fact remains that the percentage of female employment has been much lower than the male employment in both the sectors. The reason for their overall low participation may be hidden in a complexity of factors. But in situations and societal conditions where both male and female unemployment and job seekers are high, it is the women who are discriminated and pushed to lower rung of the occupational ladder and thus not given a fair chance in the job market. Secondly, tradition and gender biasness have kept many areas out of bounds from women. Regarding the recent increase in women’s employment, the Employment Market Information Programme, which collects employment statistics for the organised sectors, has revealed that though employment for women has increased in the organised sector but it was highest in what is possibly the most backward and low paying segments in organised industry.

While analysing manufacturing sectors in the public sectors it has been found that this sector had been growing during the nineties without commensurate growth in employment. Studies have shown (Bhalotra, 1998) that employment elasticity of the sector declined from
about 1.2 in the 1970s to 0.23 during the period 1988-1994. Uncertainty of work in the manufacturing sector was not only confined to women alone, but casual work was also on the increase for men. But the gap between male and female earnings in casual work nevertheless remained large and this could be attributed to the differences in the nature of their job between the two sexes (Banerjee, 1999).

Between 1995 and 1996, male employment in the public sector declined and their numbers fell in almost all industrial categories including manufacturing sector, though the overall number of female employees increased during the period, subsequently fell by 6 thousand in the manufacturing sector.

Considering the overall situation in India, there has been a gradual decline in the share of male and female employment in the secondary sector and particularly in the manufacturing sector. This decline has been severe for urban females where the percentage of women workers engaged in the manufacturing sector in the urban areas declined from 27.10% to 23.6% during 1987-88 to 1993-94 (Hirway, 1999).

The NSS study (50th Round, 1993-94) similarly point out that female employment is gradually shifting towards the tertiary sector with no indication of women shifting towards more productive sectors. (Hirway, 1999).
Female employment in the private sector has more or less maintained a steady growth as compared to the public sector. This is perhaps due to the fact that for the private sector, women are assets where the employers are “used to attributing little value to female labour and women are willing to work for pittance wages at irregular hours in abject working conditions. Few women hope to climb the promotional ladder and remain at the lower rung of the working class.” This has resulted in an upsurge in women’s employment in the private sector although not to their advantage.

In Assam, the number of female employed in the organised sector, both public and private, is far below the total number of employment among the males and on an average the annual growth of employment has been satisfactory among the males compared to females, which shows wide variation even registering a negative growth. A comparison with the all India’s situation shows that, the proportion of female employment in the organised sector, both in India as well as in Assam is far below that of male employment, which signifies that in spite of growing literacy, employment of women in the organised sector it is still a negligible figure. While in India almost 26 lakhs women were employed in the organised sector in 1996 as compared to only 72 thousand females employed for Assam for the same year. Considering that female constitutes only 21.6% of the workforce in Assam and 22.05% in India, poor representation of females in the organised sector speaks about the exploitation of
women. It is clear in the overall scenario, the total number of males employed in the organised sector far exceeds that of female participation. This reveals deterioration in the status of workers, particularly women in the Indian labour force, which may be due to various demographic pressures, slow growth and poor labour absorption in the organised sectors. In India, share of female employment in the public sector is much higher with 26.68 lakh females employed in the public sector (58.46%) as against only 18.96 lakh females in the private sector (41.54%) for the period 1996. Whereas in Assam, employment share of females is greater in the private sector than in the public sector. The data show that 72 thousand of female workers are in the public sector as against 2.7 lakh in the private sector representing a meagre 20.63% contributed by public sector. Even in case of male workers share in public sector represents 62.95% in India and 58.05% in Assam. Therefore, the question that emerges is why the percentage of women to total employees is more adverse in the public sector in Assam. The answers are hidden behind a complex matrix of social and cultural factors and a few explanations may be stated. One is that in the absence of sufficient development and expansion of public sector, which assures a stable employment, overall employment opportunity for both male and female in this sector has become restricted. Secondly, prevalent patriarchy reinforces the belief that women are basically supplementary earners and, therefore, in a job-scarce
economy societal attitudes justify elbowing women out of the job queues. Thirdly, gender bias and tradition have kept many large sectors out of bounds for women areas such as electricity generation and transmission, petroleum, gas and construction.

On the other hand for the private sector women are mostly considered assets where prescribed norms do not govern the labour market and hence women workers could be made to fluctuate according to the whims and fancies of their employers. As Kalpana Bardhan points out that, "the ideology of patriarchy makes the exclusion from higher wages, regular jobs and trade unions acceptable to the rising number of women grinding away at the lowest wages, nursing only the expectation of potential access for husband or son into the privileged workforce of the organised sectors" (Bardhan, 1985).

### 4.5 EMPLOYMENT IN THE UNORGANIZED SECTOR

The unorganised workers include people involved in agriculture and agriculture related work, forest workers, fisher folk, construction labourers, workers employed in small-scale/ancillary centre in the informal sector of industry, domestic workers, anganwadi workers, casual/contract labourers, home bored workers and self employed workers.

The number of workers in the unorganised sector increases rapidly for various reasons. The firm and enterprises in the highly
competitive market try to reduce costs. Certain aspects of the labour process are entrusted to cheap labour. The agricultural labour is too weak in the context of the rising growth of small enterprises like small retail shops, hotels and restaurants and repair shops. Workers in the unorganised sector are unprotected by law and they are the most vulnerable sections of the society with low bargaining power. (Sunderam, 1996)

The unorganised sector thus is used here to mean the informal, traditional and unregulated sector. This sector employs a large proportion of working men and women in India. According to an estimate of the National Commission on Self-Employment of Women, 92% of the total female workforce operates in the unorganised sector. Wages in this sector tend to be extremely low leading to high levels of poverty which affects the overall health of a woman, children in terms of calorie intake, health care and education which is reflected in low human development index.

It is to be noted that the task of carrying out periodic survey on the unorganised sector activities in the interim period has been entrusted with the National Sample Survey Organisation.

However, due to lack of similar comparable data for Assam and Barak Valley, a comparative study has not been feasible. However, overall picture of India emerges from the Table 8 in Appendix 3. The table projects only a rough estimate of size of female employment in the unorganised sector on rural and urban areas.
The incidence of women in unorganised sector or informal sector is much higher for both rural and urban location. This could be explained in general by the reproductive role and responsibilities of women, which determine their supply in the labour market. According to the table, it is observed that the largest concentration of unorganised female workers is in rural area (85.79 millions) whereas in urban area the number is much less (15.11 millions). In all the cases of urban, rural and overall picture, the growth rate of FWPR in the unorganised sector is found to have the same trend namely high growth rate during 1977-78 followed by a reduced growth rate during 1983 and again rising trend during 1987-88. However, the trend displays a rising growth of unorganised female workers in the rural areas. Study of the NSS survey on unorganised manufacturing by Mukhopadhyay (1999) provides information on the number of enterprises and gender disaggregated in own account and non-directory establishment at the three-digit level for India and the state of Assam. It has been observed that employment is highest in own account enterprises, which are run primarily with family labour and presumably at low earnings as well as low productivity. The study further reveals that in comparison to other states, in Assam almost 32.17% of female workers are engaged in own account enterprises and only 3.96% in non-directory enterprises in the rural areas as against 15.49% in own account and 5.31% in non-directory enterprises in the urban areas. For all India, the situation is much
different wherein the rural area own account enterprises work out to be 43.61% as against 37.11% in the urban area whereas non-directory enterprises in the rural area stand out to be 12.90% in the rural area as against 5.41% in the urban area.

From the above figures it is evident that female employment is comparatively much higher in the smallest units of production, which provide low earnings as well as low economic stability both in India as well as in Assam.

For women, self-employment accounts for a substantial proportion of women workers in Assam. The problem lies in the fact that majority of these workers are unpaid workers with no authority to exercise their decisions in the family enterprises and thus not empowering for nearly half the women engaged in traditional, family based occupations.

The concentration of a good number of females in agriculture and allied activities (Assam 86.4% and Barak Valley 77.5% according to the 1991 census) is reflective of the growing poverty, which pushes a growing number of women into agricultural sector. Despite their increasing prominence in the agricultural labour force, rural women are not being absorbed in many of the jobs outside agriculture that are developing in the rural areas.

In Assam, the percentage of females working as cultivators has increased during the latest census. This again may be due to better coverage in the latest census or it may also be due to greater
participation of women in supplementing the household income. This is also supported from Banerjee's study (1999) where she has pointed to the fact that in recent years among agricultural workers there has been an increase in the relative numbers of women cultivators as opposed to agricultural labour. This change in their status however do not assign decision making power for the females on the family plots. Such powers are vested within the men-folk. Men are gradually moving out looking for greener pastures leaving the low productivity manual work to be done by the women folk in addition to non-manual work. In Barak Valley highest percentage of female workers as cultivators exist in the Cachar district followed by Hailakandi though the participation of female workers as agricultural labourers in Barak Valley and in all its districts is higher than the state average. Higher incidence of female agricultural workers is available in Assam due to intensive cultivation of commercial crops such as rice, which is grown under favourable climatic endowments. The composition of such labour into cultivators or wage labourers is influenced by the structure of land distribution and in Assam greater inequality of land distribution harbour specific pattern of ethnic or caste based occupational specialization among women (Jose, 1989). Females constitute a very marginal proportion of workers in all the other sectors of the unorganised sector in the country as well as in the state of Assam and Barak Valley.
This implies that in the absence of productive employment in the organised sector of the economy, females are marginalised and pushed into the unorganised sector, which usually employ women to their advantage. And because women in the unorganised sector are less skilled and less educated they are marginally employed drawing fewer wages.

While the situation for male is also similar but for women these are further compounded by the control and bindings put on them by their own families under sanctions from the entire society and even the states (Banerjee, 1999).

Scenario in Assam and particularly, Barak Valley is definitely much worse than the all India scenario as overall job opportunities are very much restricted. The possible factors operating for such behavioural trends in Barak Valley will be investigated and examined in the subsequent chapters.

4.6 INCIDENCE OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The Table 6 (Appendix 3) gives us a picture of the number of job seekers registered with the employment exchanges. Since comparable data on Assam with India does not exist and the magnitude of unemployment in Assam is precisely not known, we can have an idea about the trend and dimension of the problem from the number of job seekers registered with the employment exchanges.
The Table 6 (Appendix 3) reveals that the number of job seekers registered with employment exchanges, which, during 1980 was only 16200 thousand, 348 thousand and 33.16 thousand in India, Assam and Barak Valley respectively, increased sharply during 1991 to 36300 thousand, 1356 thousand and 117.6 thousand for the respective regions. Though the annual growth of jobseekers, which can be assumed to be indicative of growth rate of unemployment, has registered a fall for India, it has increased both for Assam and Barak Valley. This could be due to the lack of employment opportunities in Assam and Barak Valley in the private sector, which has been able to employ a large number of unemployed youths in rest of the country in the unorganised sector.

In Assam, the total number of vacancies notified by the state during 1980 and 1997 were 13,003 and 5466 respectively, against which 6297 and 1956 were respectively placed on employment (as per data of Employment Exchange Statistics). The number of placement affected as a percentage of total number of job seekers (registered) gradually declined from 1975 to 1992. As a result the number of job seekers as revealed by the employment exchange data increased gradually indicating thereby the seriousness of the unemployment problem of the state. The number of jobseekers under live register of the employment exchanges of the state has increased to 9.78 lakh in 1989 than to 13.56 lakh in 1991 and finally to 14.96 lakh in 1996. This translates to an annual growth rate of 17.75%
between 1989 and 1991 and 16.51% between 1996 and 1997. The annual growth rate in respect of jobseekers shows that there has been a rising trend over the year till the year 1991. During 1991 to 1995 the growth rate suddenly fell not only in the state but also in India. This could be due to the growing disillusionment among the unemployed person regarding the employment opportunities provided by the government. This also coincides with the starting period of economic liberalisation when under new government policies; employment was restricted in government sectors. However, the growth rate of jobseekers showed an increase again during the period 1995 to 1997. While India shows a nominal growth rate in this period, the growth rate is at much higher pace in Assam indicating lack of overall job opportunity in the state.

In Barak Valley the number of jobseekers has been continuously increasing during the period 1980 to 1991. Annual growth has also shown a rising trend from 4.59% in 1981 to 14.90% in 1991. In 1991 the number of registered jobseekers per thousand population in Barak Valley was 47. This may be compared with the average figure at the all India and state level (respectively 43 and 60 registered jobseekers per thousand of population (Statistical Profile, 1998). This signifies that there exists a large stock of usable manpower both in the state as well as in the valley, which are not being exploited. All this is an indication of the growing unemployment of Assam and country as a whole. The unemployment statistic only
reflect the trend and not totality of employment and unemployment as all unemployed do not and cannot register themselves with the employment exchanges which are mostly located in the urban areas and lack of adequate information.

Though category wise detailed comparable data are not available, there exists a huge extent of under-employment or disguised unemployment in the rural areas of which the sizeable proportion of woman workers exists. The total number of educated jobseekers in India has also increased from 5.90 lakhs in 1961 to 230.6 lakhs at the end of March 1994, which constituted nearly 62% of the total jobseekers of the country (Economic Survey, 1993-94). Similarly in the state of Assam, in 1992 total number of jobseekers has increased to 8.34 lakhs, which constituted nearly 60.8 % of the total jobseekers registered in the employment exchanges of the state.

The prevalence of large scale unemployment in the rural sector has led one to believe that while unemployment affects both men and women alike yet female agricultural labourers are among the poorest section of the society with high unemployment rate and even in situations where working, they are lowly paid. Unemployment also pushes a large number of women into non-institutionalised unorganised sector to seek casual work such as domestic maids, sweepers, scavengers etc. while in rural areas, unemployment and poverty forces a growing number of women into agriculture and the informal sector where employment competition is intense. Most of the women
are employed in activities that take very specific forms where women tend to concentrate in areas of non-wage sector that suits their reproductive role as well as attending to their extension of their domestic chores. This not only severely lower downs the productivity of the women in the labour market but also their work and effort tend to remain unaccounted in the official statistics.

4.7 WPR AND MARGINAL WORKERS

The concept of marginal workers was introduced in the 1981 census. A marginal worker consists of people who reported for work for some time during the year but not long enough to qualify as main workers. The details have been indicated in Appendix 3 (Table 9).

As no census was undertaken for the state of Assam in 1981, therefore, our table depicts the picture for female and male marginal workers for the year 1991 only and as such growth comparison has not been feasible. However, a comparative scenario based on 1991 census has been drawn for India, Assam and Barak Valley for marginal workers as a percentage of respective total workers. In all the cases it is evident that women are most marginalised section of the society with highest concentration of marginal workers in all the rural areas ranging from 30% in India, 43% in Assam and 34% in Barak Valley. However, in the urban areas, female marginal workers hover around 10% to 11%. This is a clear indication of the existence of the ideology of patriarchy, the presence of which is being
experienced constantly into the material base of capitalist relation and which has been reinforced by the type of development in the Indian countryside (Sharma, 1978).

Feminist studies have therefore, repeatedly pointed out that capitalist penetration has led to the pauperization and marginalisation of both men and women but it is the later, who has been affected the most (Mies, 1980).

Again in the overall scenario, female marginal workers are found to outnumber their male counterpart. Comparatively for male percentage of male workers is less than 1% in case of urban areas and 1.3% to 2.3% in case of rural area with Assam registering the highest percentage of marginal male workers (2.3%) and both India and Barak Valley having 1.37% of marginal male workers each.

The incidence of female marginal workers is found to be most severe in rural area of Assam compared to India and even Barak Valley. Lack of industrialisation and sufficient expansion of employment opportunities has driven the work force to eke out a living in the rural sector of the economy.

Though FWPR has increased both in the rural and urban areas of India, the percentage of increase in the female marginal workers is greater than simultaneous increase in male marginal workers. This similar trend is observed throughout the state as well as in Barak Valley, with the largest concentration of marginal female workers
being located in Karimganj district to the tune of 41.5% according to the 1991 census.

In the overall analysis, it is revealed that though the FWPR has been increasing in Barak Valley and the state, marginal female workers constitute a significant proportion of the total female workers, whereas the proportion of marginal workers among the males is insignificant.

These figures aptly demonstrate the severity of marginalisation among female than male. This is clear indication of sex typing and discrimination, which is ingrained within the employment system. Such segregation bring about earning differentials, which is justified by the existence of marked differences in human capital endowment between males and females. Much of the discrimination had become institutionalized as a result of persistent marginalisation.

This could indicate the following:

- Exclusion of women from main productive employment and hence a decline in the share of wages for women.
- Concentration of women in sectors, which are considered to be low paid, or under paid sectors.
- A categorization of women in certain type of jobs, which are low in the occupational hierarchy and are low paying, which are ordinarily referred to as ‘feminization’ or segregation in employment.
- Economic inequality which is reflected in wage differentials which in the long run affects a woman's economic status and decision making capabilities of an individual.

4.8 POPULATION AND WORK PARTICIPATION RATE

A study for the period 1951 and 1991 reveals that overall population has increased throughout with India maintaining lead followed by Assam whereas Barak Valley lagging mostly behind. This is indicated in Appendix 3 (Table 4). The yearly growth rate of total population increase for India between 1951 and 1961 has been 1.98% increasing to 2.24% between 1961 and 1971 and further to 2.2% between 1971 and 1991.

The growth rate of total WPR for the same period, as indicated in Table 2, shows that this rate was marginally high at 0.96% between the periods 1951 and 1961 and fell significantly to 2.64% during 1971-1991 followed by another marginal gain of 0.65% during 1971-1991.

Assam, while maintaining a higher annual growth rate of population in the initial years (3.0% for both 1961 and 1971 with reference to respective last census) has levelled to all India average during 1991 (2.16%). However for Barak Valley, this growth rate is found to be little higher during 1961 (2.14%) then falling to India average during 1971 (2.2%) and finally again going below the national average during 1991 (1.89%) according to the latest census. The yearly growth between 1971 and 1991 for total population and WPR
for Assam shows that while the growth of population has been 2.16%, the corresponding growth of WPR has been 1.28% and in Barak Valley while the growth of population has registered to be 1.89% but the WPR growth has risen by a meagre 0.34%. This clearly shows that overall growth rate in WPR has never kept pace with the overall growth rate in population.

Similarly, the growth rate of participation of females shows a varying trend while growth rate of population was steady. However, a study of 1991 census with reference to 1971 census has shown a significant improvement of female participation as compared to MWPR and overall WPR. While this may present a very optimistic picture, however, the participation details of female workers show that in the overall situation, along with the growth of population and rise of WPR, female participation has remained below the MWPR and total WPR. Further FWPR has not improved significantly and women are always discriminated when the question of providing stable and assured jobs arises.

However, the sudden spurt in the rate of growth of FWPR during 1991 with respect to 1971 is perhaps due to change in definitional aspect in census and actually no significant improvement in women’s status has accrued. This is further confirmed by the fact that FWPR during 1991 has remained below the FWPR of 1961 and a sudden drastic unexplained drop preceded the increase in growth rate of FWPR during 1991 during 1971 with respect to 1961 census.
However, in statistical terms, from 1971 to 1991 the growth rate of FWPR and female population for India were 8.33% and 2.19% respectively whereas for the same period Assam and Barak Valley have shown a growth rate in respect of FWPR (7.97% and 4.27%) as against the population growth rate of 2.24 % and 1.93 % respectively. The latest census study also reveals that in respect of FWPR, Barak Valley is almost half to that of Assam and India.

In Barak Valley though the overall population has been increasing it has not been commensurate with a simultaneous expansion of service and other employment creating sectors. Sex ratio and literacy rate, which works out to be fairly high in the valley, is indicative of a growing increase in social awareness among the people. However non-absorption of the growing number of jobseekers has failed to harness the full potentiality of women as an important economic category of population.

The female sex ratio in India has always been found to be adverse to women and has been declining over the decades with slight improvement during 1981 census. Assam, however, shows an increasing trend throughout the entire period. The same increasing trend is also found to be in all the districts of Cachar. The steady rise in sex ratio and literacy rate in Assam and Barak Valley could be an indicator of the increase in social awareness amongst the people. This, coupled with an improvement in the FWPR could harness the full
potentiality of women as an important economic category of population.

It is a fact that wide discrepancy that exists in work participation rate among females. But it is also true that millions of women work within the home without any remuneration but taking care of the home and the household. But such household workers do not clearly figure in either the census or official statistics and thus presents a distorted picture of the real FWPR. This again speaks about the poor and exploitative representation of female workers in the overall scenario.

It is thus clear that with the overall increase in population, FWPR either in Barak Valley, Assam or India is much lower vis-à-vis MWPR. With the increasing population, combined with a poor representation in the total workforce, the unemployment in the female population is found to be alarming. The dependency ratio i.e., proportion of non-workers to total population is high and unemployment both in disguised form is equally rampant in the districts. The increasing working population is again heavily concentrated in rural areas than in the urban sectors. This shows that there exist symptoms of reliance and subsistence economy where marginalisation of women workforce is high and situation of being underpaid; unrecognized and un-remunerative jobs are common.
4.9 WPR AND LITERACY

Since there is a high degree of co-relationship between employment particularly in the high paid categories and educational qualification, it is pertinent to examine the overall literacy rate of women and their influence in the labour market.

National data on literacy rate reveals that female literacy increased from 7.3% in 1951 to 39.42% in 1991 as against male literacy of 24.9% and 64.20% during the same period (Appendix 3, Table 10). The growth of female literacy from less than 1% (0.6%) in 1901 to around 40% in 1991 is quite significant. But how far this improved female literacy has contributed to improving the status and remove marginalisation of female labour force needs to be analysed and examined. From the data on NSS rounds it is revealed that among illiterate both women and men work in large number and their work participation is comparatively high. However, within intermediate education group labour participation is low because a certain percentage opt for middle level education and in certain cases continue through secondary education. The participation rate of graduate is fairly high both in the rural and urban sectors though much less than participation by both illiterate males and females which account for 29.46% in rural sector and 29.70% (Statistical Profile, 1998) in the urban sector. However, in the rural sector, study of literature reveals that women belonging to the middle class or landed household, in spite of attaining a minimum level of education
consider working outside the household a taboo. This along with non-availability of appropriate jobs generally keeps women out of the labour market. In the urban areas, the working socio-conditions for women are more liberal but lack of availability of suitable jobs and wages often keep a large percentage of educated women out of labour force (Mehta, 1989).

The state of Assam enjoys a fairly comfortable position with respect to female literacy (48%) which is higher than national figure (39%) and male literacy (61.9%) as against the all India figure (61.4%). People in this part of the country are influenced to a great extent by the matriarchal pattern of society prevailing in the neighbouring states, where women venturing out in the open in search of educational employment are not looked upon as a taboo but is generally accepted as a natural right. This perhaps could also explain the reason behind enrolment ratios both at primary and middle level of education being significantly high at 46.7% and 40.5% respectively as against the all India figure of 41.4% and 37.4% (Statistical Profile, 1998). Like the rest of India, the percentage of female dropouts in the middle and high education is probably due to lack of sufficient encouragement and incentive to promote investment in girls’ education. Moreover, in our social set up male enjoys superior social status and are considered to be a potential income earner. This sets up a chain effect, adversely influencing the female status and opportunities for employment and training in general.
The distribution of female workers among different occupational activity reveals that in spite of growth of literacy, almost 86.4% (1991) of female workers are engaged in agriculture and other allied activities whereas participation percentage in services and industry is low. This again reflects that in spite of high female literacy rate, a large percentage of the female workforce is engaged in agriculture to earn a living and thereby contribute to family income. Though a considerable proportion of educated women workers are steadily making their inroads into the organised sector, it is much below the male participation, in the organised sector. Women's educational capability thus, which has expanded over the year is not being harnessed effectively in services more so in jobs requiring professional, technical, administrative and managerial skill.

Literacy ratio in Barak Valley has long been high as compared to the state of Assam and country as a whole. The male literacy records the highest percentage of 66.40% against the all India figure of 64.20% and state figure of 61.90%. Female literacy (46%) also fares better than the all India percentage of 39.19%. Among the three districts however, literacy rate is much higher in Cachar followed by Karimganj and Hailakandi. Cachar has been maintaining a consistently satisfactory female literacy trend in comparison with the state as well as India. This perhaps is a reflection of the fact that people in this part of the country are educationally more conscious and is aware of the vital need of education.
Participation of women in elementary education in the valley reveals that the highest enrolment at primarily level is in Cachar with Karimganj district marginally behind. Similarly the girl participation in the middle level in both the districts are quite high compared to both Assam and India. However, as one proceeds towards higher education the decline in enrolment is observed throughout the districts, state and in national level as per the logic discussed earlier.

In spite of the fact that the literacy rate among females in Barak Valley is comparatively higher, yet we find that FWPR significantly low accounting for only 11.3% (1991 census) which is much below the state and national levels. Unemployment trend in the valley reveals that sizeable proportion of educated and capable manpower still need to be gainfully employed and earn minimum level of wages and income. Though unemployment situation in Assam is acute, Barak Valley situations slightly better off with Hailakandi registering the highest unemployment in the Valley but below the state level. Low level of literacy could be one significant factor for this behaviour in Hailakandi.

4.10 OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN OF TRIBAL WOMEN OF INDIA, ASSAM AND BARAK VALLEY

The tribal population of India (during 1991. 67.76 million i.e. the tribal constitutes 8.01% of the total population) is larger than that of any country in the world. Despite the protection given to the tribal
population by the Constitution of India (1950), it remains the most backward ethnic group in India on the three important indicators of development, viz, health, education and income earning capabilities through effective economic participation. The tribal are predominantly rural (92.6% of their population) and literacy rate of the tribal is 23.63% (1991), which is much lower than literacy rate of the general population (52.21%) (1991). The women in the tribal community as in other communities constitute nearly half of the tribal population and the well-being of the tribal community depends importantly on the status of their women.

An analysis of the data presented in Appendix 3 (Table 11) shows that the total percentage of tribal female workers has been increasing since 1971, after the fall from 1961 census and gradually rising in the 1981 and 1991 census. The similar trend is found for the tribal female workers in Assam from 48.62% (1961) to 9.47% during 1971 and thereafter to 33.83% during 1991 census. Non-working tribal female constitute a large section of the total tribal population implying that a large proportion of female population who substitute their family income by working in the fields and home are not counted in the total working force and hence their contribution are not estimated.

A comparison with other female workers reveals that share of tribal female workers is much more (43.71% in India and 33.83% in
Assam) as against all female workers (22.05% in India and 21.61% for Assam).

The Table 12 (Appendix 3) shows that the agriculture has remained the main overwhelming and predominant source of livelihood among the tribal woman in India, either as cultivators or agricultural labourers in almost equal proportion with other services representing a negligible presence (less than 10%). Compared to India, the tribal female workers in Assam are mostly engaged as cultivators constituting almost 80% of the total female workers. In the 1991 census there has been a gradual shift towards agriculture and other related occupation. Shift in agriculture is indicative of the proportion of the landless workers in agriculture which again implies the percentage of seasonal and marginal workers are more among the female agricultural labourers.

A comparison with non-tribal female workers reveals that share of tribal female workers is much more (43.71% in India and 33.83% in Assam) as against all female workers (22.05% in India and 21.61% for Assam). In spite of a large worker percentage among tribal families, they are predominantly rural. 92.6% of the tribal population are concentrated in the rural areas (Singh 1993). Though male members are still considered to be the main bread winners, tribal women are socially more independent. However, their independent status is not reflected in their economic independence and upliftment. As compared to non-tribal females, the tribal females lack access to
property rights, access to basic reserves such as land, forest, and water. Due to their low literacy levels, their educational status is also low followed by low enrolment of male-female ratio and high drop-outs in schools (Rao, 1990). This perhaps explains for the extremely negligible percentage (0.06% of tribal women in institutions of higher education (Rao, 1990). With such low educational status, women's entry into service sector and professional job is limited and therefore, they are mainly concentrated in agricultural operations and work related to forest produce. Only a very small percentage are involved in categories of jobs relating to livestock, forestry, mining quarrying processing, trade and commerce. Occupational diversification being limited, therefore, it transpires that though FWPR in Assam is high, they are mainly relegated to occupations involving less pay and in sectors where their work is not monetarily valued.

The structural subordination of women to men are perhaps less rampant in Assam due to liberal socio-cultural norms, but the phenomenon is comparatively more prominent in the rural areas than in the urban areas. Due to restriction in social mobility of the tribal, their engagement in 'other services' which includes employment in government and other establishments is limited. In general however, triba! women participate more intensively in economic activities to compensate the low participation rate among men.

It thus, follows that the participation of women in Assam and Barak Valley like the rest of India where opportunities of stable and
secured form of employment are lacking. The increased entry of women into the lowest rungs of the skill hierarchy as agricultural labour and unskilled workers has only contributed to aggravating the process of marginalisation that has necessitated their entry into labour force. Consequently, they have been relegated into subordinate and inferior position in terms of wage levels, employment status and intensity of work in relation to male workers. The opportunities of upward occupational mobility are virtually lacking and a lot remains to be done both in the social and economic front before the benefits of various development projects could improve the participation of the female workers in this region.
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