

## North Eastern Spectrum of Gender Equity : A Myth and Reality?

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A society can be best defined as a dynamic concept with fluidity. With due course of time society witnesses various changes and created a space for adoption and adaptations that makes the whole concept of society a flexible in nature. One of the wrong notion that is prevailing in the society since then, till the date is the clubbing of two terms into one i.e: “gender” and “sex. Whereas , gender is an outcome of the social construction and sex is biological. One is born with “XX” and “XY” chromosome is sex where as the “masculinity” and the “feminine” is gender. Gender is the social cleavage of the society which determines different roles in respective to their sex. Which is known as gender roles . Anna, Senden, and Renstrom elaborately discuss how the concept of gender may be operationalized by considering several dimensions, which can be categorised into four primary facets: (a) physiological or biological features, often referred to as sex; (b) gender identity or an individual's self-perceived gender; (c) legal gender, which pertains to the gender associated with gender. Various feminist scholarships draws attention bringing light on nation and ethnicity with the concept of gender (Anna, Senden & Renstrom, 2021). In the past two decades, feminist work has critically examined various



aspects of universalism, such as the belief in a gender revolution leading to complete social transformation. It has also questioned the explanatory goals of second-wave feminism and the effectiveness of certain analytic categories, particularly the concepts of "women" and gender. However, it is important to note that within the realm of social sciences, there exists a strong emphasis on the pursuit of explanation as an intellectual endeavour.

While making an attempt on dealing with the gender based violence, we should not tend to fail in focus on the **cult of silence**. Violence can be best defined as a process of instilling fear psychophysics within the mind of individuals. Women often experienced violence in various forms as physical, mental and financial. Though in the recent times the society is able to break the cult of silence but that too limited to the physical violence, whereas the mental and financial violence are still under the cover. A violence is the only key to maintain the stronghold in a gender based stratified society, where women are always considered to be a second sex in a patriarchal society. North east is not an exception too. Geographical canvas of the northeast supports a feudalism with agriculture as the backbone of the economy. In order to maintain a hold over the land and its production, women must be convinced as a reproductive agents to procure labour to the land in this process of reproduction women often faced physical and mental violence either initially in the domestic sphere and gradually in the public sphere as well, if we broaden the lens of the violence, it would be crystal clear how the cult of silence worked as a catalyst in encouraging this crimes even for a long time period.

While making an attempt on dealing with gender equity as a myth or a reality, one must first be clear with the concept of gender and how does both the terms related to one another in the contemporary times. Gender is a social construction which is framed to meet the social expectation that associated with the characteristics of "being a man" or "being an women" in the society. In the contemporary times a gender issue emerged as an intense topic of debate and discourse in terms of equality and equity in the society. The notion of gender is often clubbed with the sex and one is trained in a particular way to behave since the time of birth. These treatment not only confined within the behaviours but also in their tastes, choices in everyday life. i.e an woman is asked to be



conscious about her skin tone, obedient with a chaste character where as a man is asked to be strong, brave and a productive one.

Since the time immemorial; women are often deprived from certain privileges that could change her position from a reproductive agent to a productive asset, the expected gender roles confines their physical and mental mobility within the four walls. In other words equity was a completely an alien concept for the women,, i.e, this prevailing deprivations for a long time eventually give rise to the concept of **equity** more of **equality**. Equity is a treatment that is offered as per the requirement which make a fair play.

The geographical canvas of the northeastern region is surrounded by hills and rivers leads to a distinguished form of physiographic condition to support a typical form of livelihood to this region This bifurcation was historically enhanced by the **chicken neck corridor** which eventually develops an unique cultural background to the region in reference to the Pan-Indian level. People of northeastern region are mostly dependable on agriculture as a main source of income back then till the date along with some other occupations like fishing, pottery and so on. Though gradually the scenario experiencing some changes but the hardly a few changes is noticeable in the gender engagement over these areas.

An attempt has been made in this work to throw light on "does the region is still lagging behind in maintaining a balanced gender involvement culture or in other words a gender neutral society"

The idea of gender equity is an intense topic of debate and discourse in a global level and many of the scholars postulated various theories or evidences to support the gender equity as a reality. But while making a microscopic analysis to this aspect in reference to the north eastern region the picture is yet quite doubtful. Though in comparison to the Pan-Indian level this area has a fair representation of women gradually in the overall frame, but the voice of patriarchy is still audible, which made the picture of gender equity a feeble one. Though in the recent times government sponsored various women centric schemes, the question is to what extent women enjoys those privileges if its so, then why the picture is so blurry yet so far.

In order to make a deep analysis to the above concerned issues, we adopted various parameters such as education, health



,violence to study the status of women in the northeastern region as our area of interest.

Despite of various other practices prevailing in other parts of India such as 1, sati practice and wearing Burkha and female infanticide, dowry death, status women in this concerned area is slightly better off but historically northeast India is bounded up with various customary laws which acts like an invisible force to make a distinct stratification within the society on the basis of gender. These customary laws acts as a catalyst in forbidding the movement of an women. "One is not born, rather, one becomes a woman." She argues that it is not the case that women were naturally inclined to do childcare or housework as was earlier assumed, but rather that females were held back by their upbringing , or by social and cultural expectations from them or by the limited educational or job opportunities available to them.<sup>1</sup> . hence this gender based division put the women just as a bearer and rearer of child, which eventually make her being a second sex :an unproductive and submissive to the first sex i.e male. The customary laws which is prevailing in the concerned areas which not only framed women as a secondary option but also further proceed in the process of "reification of women" North East India has an unique practice of "bride price", where the groom had to pay a price in order to marry the bride for her absence in her natal home. But the question is does this practice uplift the status of an women as an asset? With a deep analysis, it could be visible that instead of recognising her as an asset, this is more of a reification of women, where her worth is measured with money and paying the price to her family is like making her an object which could be exchanged for transaction. *"The Zemei Naga males are forbidden to touch the meat of an animal killed by a woman, as it is 'considered that touching the meat would be below their dignity because bravery is a quality of men and docility that of women"*, this could be also seen as a how women were pushed away from the main stream of economic earning to a home maker, where she is just being a reproductive agent than being a productive asset.

North East also had the practice of matriliney prevailing amongst the Garo and Khashi community, where the offspring bears the maternal lineage and also younger daughter holding the property

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<sup>1</sup> Simone De Beauvoir The second sex



of the deceased parents, but only as mere custodian of the property, as she couldn't sell off the property on her own. Even in this matrilineal society dominance of man is still prevalent while making any of the decision, maternal uncles hold a louder voice in any of the processes. Thus, it can be said that it's just a transition of power from the males of the typical paternal order to the maternal patriarchal order.

Often an widow and a barren women's presence is considered to be inauspicious in various rituals within the Brahmanical fold, thus this shows how society perceived women not as a woman but more of a wife and a mother, society framed women as an object which needs to be either guarded or bearer of a child, while doing so society made a successful attempt in this process of manipulation.

The treatments in respect to the gender happened right after the birth of the child, the birth of a boy is more welcome than a girl in the family.

Thus, these customary laws portray the status of the women in the northeast platform and how these laws act as a pulling force from achieving gender equity.

Though in the contemporary times, certain changes can be observed in the concerned area, but still it's yet so far from achieving a gender equitable society. Education is still a dream for many of the girls. Though government sponsored schemes like, "*Sarvashiksha Abhiyan*" to ensure education for all, but the parents' reluctance to send off their daughters to the school is its biggest flaw of the concept. Hence this deprivation further enhanced the employment gap between male and female. Though few women are successful in imbibing higher education and getting enrolled in a job, in a corporate sector the preferences are generally more open for men in comparison to women, like a company prefers more male employees in the field of marketing and executives, while women are mostly welcomed in the advertising field.

Even in the field of health, women often ignore their own health issues in order to fulfill their household chores, maximum women in India suffer from various health issues like low bone density, fatty liver, miscarriage, Economic inefficiency of her own and dependency on the male partner to undergo a proper medication treatment is another curse on women's mobility.



So, while moving back to the main concern of the topic *gender equity as a myth or reality* within the proposed spectrum is a broad area for various new issues to be focused.

Even though from an outer space northeast is often portrayed as a epitome of gender equity since a long back in the paper works. But reality is quite contrasting to it, even after a numerous efforts, women are still considered as second sex, who is incapable of dealing with things other than the kitchen. i.e, Irom Sharmila who went on a hunger strike for 16 years from November 2000, to protest against the AFSPA act failed to gain the confidence of the people as a leader. Thus, this shows the picture where the general notion of gender division of labour is deeply rooted. Political participation of women is still very countable, idea of equity is still remain a partial reality in the northeastern spectrum.

The eight states located in the Northeastern region of India are characterised by a mostly tribal population, resulting in a distinctive and intricate social environment. The task of comprehending the North Eastern states of India from a gendered perspective is of utmost importance. An investigation conducted by the North East Network examined a sample of 152 Naga women belonging to various tribes. This study sheds light on the enduring influence of customary rules within the Naga community, which perpetuate a patriarchal worldview and normalise violence against women. A multitude of emerging inquiries have characterised the mindset of contemporary individuals. Is the stratum of their belief system and insecurity regarding their culture the only factor at play, or is the politics of power the driving force behind these inquiries? Could the recent appeal from the **All Nyishi Youth Association** to all political parties in Arunachal Pradesh, discouraging the issuance of party credentials to Arunachalee women married to non-tribal men in panachayat and municipal elections, be rationalised? The impediment to their release is the potential erosion of the rights, integrity, progress, and well-being of the indigenous population in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

It is postulated that the current ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities in the state of Manipur is predominantly driven by political factors rather than just rooted in ethnic differences. During an interview, a representative from the National Federation of Indian Women emphasised that regardless of ethnic groups such as Meiteis and Kukis, it is evident that women



and children bear the brunt of the suffering<sup>2</sup>. This particular scenario bears a striking resemblance to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Revisiting the topic of the weaponization of women's bodies, it is important to note that the issue is situated within a context characterised by disturbance and violence. The protest by 12 Imas against the Indian Army's actions under AFSPA and the incident involving two Kuki tribal women being paraded naked and assaulted by a mob of men are closely related. The context of the situation varies, but it is important to identify who the victims and agents are in each scenario. The Meira Paibis, a collective of Manipuri women self-identified as "Women with Torches," spearheaded several remarkable peaceful protests across a range of concerns. But the reconfiguration of this group's identity as the instigator of violence within the framework of two distinct ethnic groups serves as a significant indicator of the power dynamics inherent within the governing body.

Extensive research has been conducted on the limited involvement of women in political activities within the North Eastern region. The gendered lens reveals the evident lack of women's political participation in electoral politics. The lower levels of political participation cannot solely be attributed to the behaviour of political parties; there are other significant factors at play. Is it possible to overlook the attitudes of women towards being in a domestic environment, their acceptance of being a homemaker, or the dominance of their male counterparts in the decision-making process? The Indian Government's recent policy on reservation for women, the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam** (Salutation to Women Power Bill), the 128th constitutional amendment bill seeks to reserve 33 percent of seats in the Lok Sabha (which would amount to 181 of the total 543 seats) and in state legislative assemblies, including the Delhi Legislative Assembly, and is definitely a positive outlook in political sphere. It would be an interesting journey to assess in near future. The world is waiting to see the spillover effect of this promising development in the realm of politics. In the contemporary times, works done by various scholars often ended up in focusing on the unavailability of exposures either in political or economic terms to women in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/in-manipur-women-are-both-victims-and-perpetrators-of-sexual-violence/>



maintaining a gender equitable society. the recent political exposure of the 33% reservation of women would be a basic drift to make a study on the topic how women can access to this to make is a provision a fruitful one.

Women of North Eastern region is closely linked to the region's peace process. Most of the researches attributing women in promoting peace. While women in the Northeast have played a significant role in the peace process, their involvement has been limited to specific peace initiatives and has not translated into broader political power or influence. Despite their efforts to prevent the breakdown of society, women's peace activities have been hindered by ethnic divisions and a focus on their respective communities (Bhattacharya, 2010). Additionally, their rise in the peace process may be driven more by changing circumstances than a genuine desire for societal transformation, leading to their exclusion from decision-making and participation. A lot of scholars highlights that both state and non-state actors contribute equally to the destabilisation of the situation for women residing in North East India.

If the question is about gender, the views held by women regarding traditional practises comes in between. These beliefs may exhibit a profound level of internalisation, which can be shaped by various cultural, religious, and societal influences. Alternatively, they may undergo transformation and adjustment in light of evolving circumstances and individual encounters. Acknowledging the plurality of these belief systems and the autonomy of women in determining their engagement with customary rituals is of utmost significance. Furthermore, it is essential to comprehend and uphold these values in order to advance gender equality and foster cultural variety throughout society.

Even after a numerous efforts made by various pioneers for eradicating the various disparity prevailing within the society, but none of these attempts include the concept of gender in their motives. In context of Assam, Sankardeva initiated a *Neo-Vaishnavism* movement, to established a "*eka-saraniya-dharma*", with the believe of maintaining equality among the people, but gendering alienation is clearly visible till the date, in various satras women are strictly prohibited from entering the same. This is a clear juxtapose to its own concept of an equal society.

The north east area of India lacks a forum to address women's issues, including domestic and ethnic violence. Although external

social organisations provide training and confidence development, creating a constituent base is crucial for gaining public support for tackling gender-based violence. Creating networks of women promotes regional interaction on gender equity, women's rights, and empowerment. The network can facilitate partnerships between domestic violence and sexual assault activists/organizations. They can also act as pressure organisations to promote women's rights at regional and national levels. All of these might help women live violence-free.

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