

A study on educational level to Ensure Empowerment and Gender Equality among the women of Hindu, Muslim and Christian Religious Groups in Assam, India

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Abstract

Literacy is considered to be the hallmark of modern society. While literacy is about acquiring the skill of reading and writing, education is a broader concept taking into consideration the overall personality development of a human necessary for social change and socio-economic progress of a society. Religion, in this regard has always being a pioneer towards improving the level of educational attainment through religious institutes and formal education system. But different religious communities show inequality in the level of literacy consequent upon diverse socio-cultural and economic status which causes human group disparities. It is noteworthy to mention that education of women is fundamental necessity for overall upliftment in their respective societies. Therefore, with a purpose to understand the role of education towards women's empowerment, it is an attempt to study the level of educational attainment among the female of Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities of Assam, a state located in the northeastern region of India. The paper also tries to examine the if there exist any gender disparity and rural-urban differential in educational level among the selected religious groups. The data necessary for the work have been collected from both secondary and primary sources while the entire survey is conducted on the basis of stratified random sampling and census survey techniques. The study reveals that the literacy level among the Hindu, Muslim and Christian women of the state have improved over the past few year, however, share of female literates is much lower compared to the male counterpart among these groups and the state as a whole.

Keywords: *Literacy, religion, empowerment, educational level, gender disparity.*

Introduction:

Education is the most important tool considered for the overall personality development of a human necessary for social change. Literacy and educational attainment is considered to be the hallmark of modern society (Kar and Sharma, 1994). In addition, the issue of educational development is so basic and fundamental to human life that its differential levels result in disparities among people and places (Desai, 1993). Thus, literacy and education plays a strikingly significant role for the development of any society. As such, these elements are considered as basic indicators in planning strategies for socio-economic development.

Moreover, literacy and education are good indicators of the socio-economic progress of a country as also of any social or religious group. Religion has always being a pioneer towards progress in literacy and improving the level of educational attainment through religious institutes and formal education system. India being a welfare state all its citizens enjoy equal economic, cultural and educational opportunities to and progress (Kaur and Kaur, 2012). But different religious communities show inequality in the level of literacy consequent upon diverse socio-cultural and economic status which causes human group disparities (Hussain and Siddiqui, 2010).

It is noteworthy to mention that education of women is fundamental necessity for overall upliftment in their respective societies. Therefore, keeping in view the importance of educational parameters in the progress of female population in any region and among the religious groups of Assam, this study attempts to throw light on the level and inter-religious variation in educational attainment among the women of Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities of the state. In addition to this, the study also investigates the gender disparity and rural-urban differential in educational levels among the female folks of these religious groups.

Aim of the study:

- i) to examine the level and inter-religious variation in the educational level among the female populace of Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious groups in Assam;
- ii) to examine the rural-urban differential in the level of educational attainment among the female folks of these religious groups and;
- iii) to find out the gender disparity in the level of educational attainment among these selected religious groups.

Database and Methodology:

This study aims to fulfill the purpose of enunciating the procedure and techniques involved in studying the trend and rate of educational level and other aspects related with it such as gender disparity and rural-urban differential among women belonging to Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious groups in Assam. The data necessary for the work have been collected from both secondary and primary sources.

The present study deals with the major religious groups residing in the state of Assam which includes Hindus (61.47 per cent) while Muslims (34.22 per cent) and Christians (3.74 per cent), as per Census 2011. Further, in order to access the inter and intra religious variation, the districts with highest and lowest population size of each religious group considered for the study has been selected for primary survey. The

survey has been carried out with the help of a well structured schedule cum questionnaire. The entire survey is conducted on the basis of stratified random sampling and census survey techniques.

It is important to note that the districts taken up for primary survey is based on the population size registered during Census 2001. According to 2001 Census, Dhemaji district registers highest Hindus population (95.97 per cent), Dhubri with highest Muslims (74.28 per cent) and North Cachar Hills has the largest Christian population (26.59 per cent). Moreover, population share of Hindus is least in Dhubri (24.74 per cent) while concentration of Muslim (1.75 per cent) population is least in Dhemaji district. Moreover, Christians are least in population size in the district of Morigaon (.09 per cent). Besides this, primary data have also been collected from the largest urban centre of the state; Guwahati city. Moreover, Barrak Valley has also been included for primary survey. While considering the three districts of Barrak valley, the districts of Cachar with highest Hindu (61.35 per cent) and Christian (2.14 per cent) population while Hailakandi with highest share of Muslim population (57.56 per cent) have been taken up for the purpose of the study. Moreover, one town each from upper and lower Brahmaputra valley (viz Barpeta and Sivasagar) have also been considered for study and primary survey. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the secondary data has been considered on the basis of Census years from 2001 to 2011.

Study Area:

The entire state of Assam has been taken into consideration in the present study to have an overall understanding of the pattern and rate of work participation among women of the selected religious groups. In addition, the districts of Dhemaji, Dhubri, Dima Hasao and Morigaon have been selected for micro level study. Moreover, Guwahati, Barpeta and Sivasagar have been selected to understand the research problem in urban context. Apart from this, selected town of Barak valley is included in the study to get an essence of the southern part of the state.

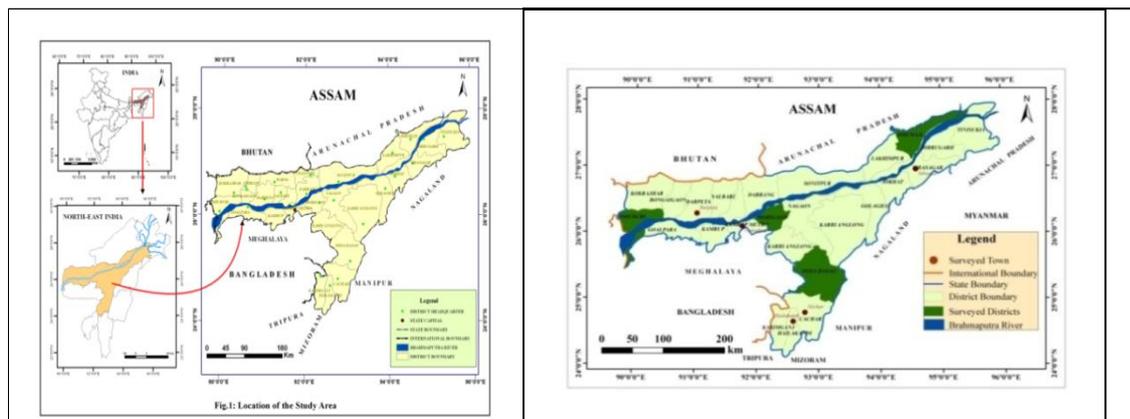


Fig. 1

Result and Discussion:

It is believed that the educational scenario and literacy level was considerably low until the 1970s. However, it is delighting to find out the progress in this context over the recent years with the introduction of compulsory free education for the children below 14 years of age under the Constitutional directives of India. This has also improved the educational situation of Assam especially among the women of various religious groups. It is worth mentioning that the religious institutes like the *Vaisnavaite Satras*, *Madrassas* and *Christian Missionaries* of the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious groups respectively have significantly influenced the literacy pattern and educational system of the state like in any other part of the world.

Educational achievements of every individual and a region as a whole can be measured by analyzing the level of educational attainment of a person. This is because it is the quality and skill of literates which is counted rather than the quantity (Kar and Sharma, 1994). Educational attainment is also a powerful indicator of well-being. Understanding the level of educational attainment among the women of any region or religion gives a concrete picture of socio-economic prosperity and progress among the female folk and the society as a whole. In this backdrop, the pattern of educational attainment among the female population of Hindu, Muslim and Christian of Assam is analyzed in terms of inter-religion variation, rural-urban differential and gender differences in educational attainment.

Understanding the pattern of educational attainment among the women of Hindu, Muslim and Christian of Assam is complex in nature. It is closely associated with the social profile of the religious group and eventually influenced by geographical location of the societies. This can be well explained through the Census data that reveal significantly varying response of women towards education at different levels. Interesting, Muslims of Assam with lowest literacy rate among the religious groups of Assam, records highest percentage of school enrollment in the primary level of education followed by the Christian and the Hindus (Table 1). However, this rate decreases among the Muslim and Christian in the higher educational level (beyond Middle level education) in contradictory to the enhancement of literacy rate among the Hindus in terms of higher education. This holds good in case of female as well where in the Muslim girls (28.52 per cent) outnumbers other religious groups in the educational attainment at primary and middle level of the schooling along with girls from Christian (27.45 per cent) communities having moderately equal participation while Hindus (21.03 per cent) have lowest share of females in this category. The discouraging fact is gradual decline in the percentage of females of Muslim and Christian population (1.66 per cent and 2.02 per cent respectively) group in the field of higher education. The Hindus have a better percentage of women with higher educational attainment (5.48 per cent).

Thus, the progress of education among women although is improving, yet have not reach the mark where more numbers of women are seen at the greatest level of education. The

increasing participation of females in the elementary education level is mainly due to proliferation of free education and the provision of mid day meals in the primary and middle level of the schools. Moreover availability of adequate educational infrastructure and establishing of government aided schools at local level have also encouraged more number of children towards attaining schools. Contribution of religious institutes (*Satras, Madrassas, Missionaries jell*) in the promotion of education at the grassroots level must also be credited in this regard. However the scenario in case of higher educational level among the women of these religious groups is not encouraging suggesting a higher incidence of school dropouts of girls students especially during and after primary stage of education among the Muslim and Christian with minimal number of females attaining higher educational degrees. Economic backwardness, scarcity of institutes for higher education in the nearby reach, lack of adequate transportation, social constraint and geographical location are some and other missionary activities.

of the reason preventing women from availing higher education and choosing household activities instead of economic sustainability.

It is thus revealed that there exist a great variation in the educational level among women of Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious groups owing to variation in the educational facilities available in the area, enthusiasm towards better educational provisions, modernization and universalization of education system etc. this is also reflected from the field data examination where the percentage of female literates in the primary and middle stage of education is high among the Muslim and Christians compared to the Hindu counterparts, the story seems to have reversed in the case of higher educational attainment. However, it calls for attention in respect of high participation of Christian women in the technical or professional courses compared to the Hindus and Muslim. This is mainly due to large involvement of Christian women in the profession of nursing

Table 1: Male-Female Educational Level among Hindu, Muslim and Christian Population of Assam, 2011

Religious Groups	Literates without educational level		Below primary		Primary		Middle		HSLC		Senior Secondary		Non technical diploma		Technical diploma		Graduate and above	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Hindu	4.69	4.86	18.98	20.5	20.93	21.03	23.05	25.17	8.81	8.63	15.97	14.23	0.01	0.01	0.36	0.09	7.2	5.48
Muslim	5.03	4.62	34.11	33.00	26.00	28.52	17.02	20.3	4.53	4.56	9.55	7.3	0.07	0.01	0.14	0.03	3.55	1.66
Christian	5.28	5.13	26.26	28.13	27.46	27.45	21.9	22.18	7.89	7.62	8.25	7.33	0.01	0.00	0.12	0.14	2.83	2.02
All Religion	4.8	4.81	23.4	24.21	22.6	23.32	21.3	23.7	7.6	7.48	13.9	12.08	0.00	0.01	0.3	0.08	6.1	4.31

Source: Census of India, 2011.

Table 2: Male-Female Educational level among the Hindu, Muslim and Christians of Assam, 2014-2016

Religious groups	Level of Educational attainment (in percentage)													
	With no education		Primary		Middle		HSLC and HS		Graduation		Post Graduation		Technical or Profession degree	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Hindu	2.01	3.17	29.20	27.90	23.05	26.80	27.62	27.58	11.55	10.02	3.60	2.97	2.97	1.56
Muslim	3.33	4.79	33.60	32.87	25.06	29.92	24.6	22.78	9.55	7.00	2.32	1.75	2.08	0.89
Christian	2.19	3.92	29.89	28.01	24.9	26.18	29.01	27.33	10.99	9.09	2.93	2.59	1.09	2.88

Source: Primary Survey 2014-2016.

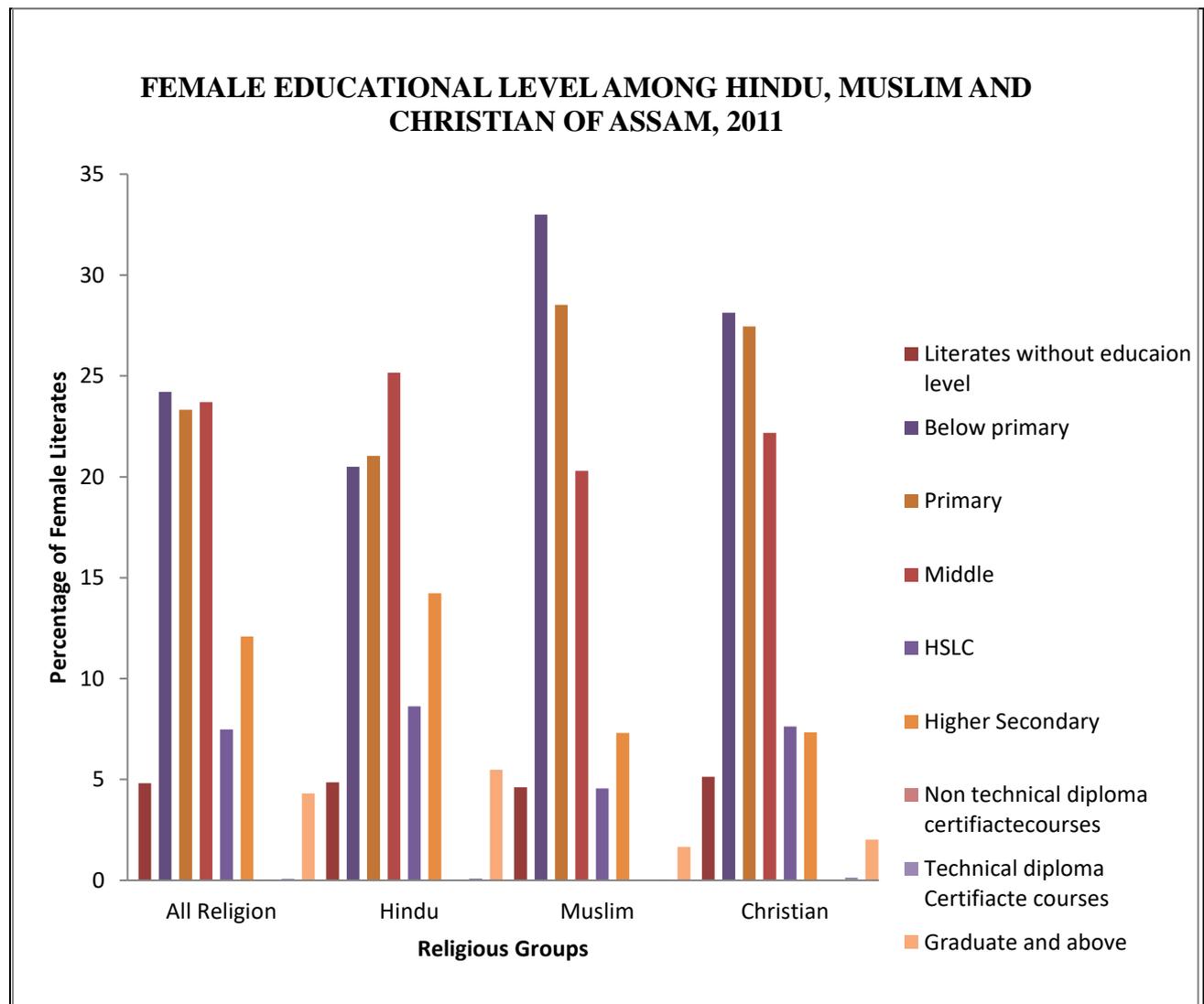


Fig. 2

A better understanding of female educational attainment among the religious groups can be achieved by viewing the variation in the rural and urban areas. According to Census data 2011, the proportion of females having educational attainment of graduation and above varies from 12.62 per cent in the urban area to 2.39 per cent in the rural areas. This is also equally applicable in case of female population of Hindu, Muslim and Christian groups living in the urban area with higher percentage of graduates and above (13.67 per cent, 6.71 per cent and 11.49 per cent respectively) compared to the rural foil with much lesser proportion of female achieving graduation and higher degrees (3.08 per cent, 1.07 and 1.04 per cent respectively). This is perhaps due to lack of

adequate educational facilities for higher education in the rural areas and poor transportation and communication system between the rural and urban areas that affect the female higher educational attainment in distant places worsening the literacy scenario of the state. It may be mentioned here that the Hindus exhibit a better position in terms of urban female educational attainment followed by the Christians while the Muslim women have the least position in this regard (Table 3).

It may be mentioned here that although the higher the educational pattern among the rural female is not satisfactory in terms of higher education but they have shown a brighter aspect in terms of primary and middle stage of education. It is worth mentioning in this context

that mere literacy without any educational level could be considered to be a liability to the society, because, on one hand, the solid foundation of the past gets shaken and on the other, they are not equipped enough to meet the challenges of the new (Sharma, 1993). The prevalence of high rural-urban differential in the female educational attainment level among the Hindus, Muslims and Christians of Assam is mainly due to growing educational awareness and improvisation of education facilities in the urban areas accompanied with better economic condition among the urban dwellers. In contrast to this, the rural areas characterized by inadequate provision of educational infrastructure, lack of consciousness regarding importance of educating girl child, shortage of trained teachers in the schools of rural areas, social stigma of non preference of co-educational educational centres for enrolling girl child, underestimating the importance of female education, engaging girls in household activities are some of the reasons that act as binding force of low female literacy rate in the rural areas. A better and higher educational attainment is a subject of enhanced socio-economic development making a person more equipped to meet the various needs of the ever changing societies. This is also strongly applicable in case of women of different religious groups for their overall development.

Table 3: Male-Female Educational Level among Hindu, Muslim and Christian Population of Rural and Urban Areas in Assam, 2011

Religious Groups	Rural/ Urban	Literates without educational level		Below Primary		Primary		Middle		HSLC		Senior Secondary		Non Technical diploma		Technical diploma		Graduate and above	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
All Religion	Rural	5.1	5.01	25.6	26.4	23.78	24.7	21.7	24.2	7.28	7.00	12.5	10.25	0.03	0.00	0.14	0.04	3.91	2.39
	Urban	3.6	3.95	13.4	14.8	16.79	17.4	19.5	21.5	9.16	9.54	20.4	19.91	0.04	0.02	0.97	0.23	16.05	12.62
Hindu	Rural	5.00	5.12	20.9	22.5	22.3	22.3	24	26.3	8.64	8.29	14.5	12.29	0.01	0.00	0.17	0.05	4.51	3.08
	Urban	3.6	3.96	11.9	13.6	15.84	16.6	19.6	21.4	9.46	9.78	21.4	20.81	0.04	0.02	1.03	0.23	17.18	13.67
Muslim	Rural	5.2	4.71	35.5	34.3	26.43	29.3	16.8	20	4.24	4.17	8.93	6.43	0.07	0.01	0.08	0.02	2.88	1.07
	Urban	3.9	3.88	21.9	21.9	22.16	22	19.5	22.7	7.21	7.89	15.1	14.7	0.07	0.02	0.61	0.1	9.6	6.71
Christian	Rural	5.4	5.27	27.3	29.4	28.32	28.4	22.1	22.3	7.66	7.34	7.2	6.03	0.00	0.00	0.07	0.08	1.95	1.14
	Urban	3.2	3.61	12.7	14.2	16.32	17.3	19.9	20.6	10.9	10.6	21.9	21.37	0.03	0.02	0.68	0.82	14.39	11.49

Source: Census of India, 2011.

Like other aspects of the society, there also exist notable male-female differences in terms of educational attainment among the religious groups of Assam with specific reference to the Hindu, Muslim and Christians taken up for the study. The gender disparity in level of educational attainment among the Hindu, Muslim and Christians of the state is examined by Sopher's Disparity Index (DI) (1974) = $\log_{10} \frac{p(1-q)}{q(1-p)}$ where, p and q are male and female literacy rates respectively expressed in terms of probability.

According to Census 2011, a varying range of male-female participation in different stages of education is exhibit. The situation is satisfactory if male-female equality in term of educational participation is considered in the lower and middle school educational stage. However, the male percentage of literates is found to be higher in the educational level beyond matriculation. Gender disparity in educational attainment at primary level of schooling varies from negative disparity index among the Hindu and the Muslim groups (-0.02 and -0.05 respectively) and no disparity index among the Christians which is a statement itself suggesting a forward movement towards holding a gender just society. But eventually the scenario is completely different in the higher educational level i.e. after matriculation with high gender disparity that prevail in the graduation and other higher educational level which is strikingly high among all the religious groups of the state (0.32). This differential is highest among the Muslims (0.44) followed by the Hindus (0.34) while Christians (0.19). Thus it can be summarized from this revelation that with the introduction of free elementary level education in the state complemented with free food under Midday meal scheme, the percentage of females attaining the schools have increased but with the growing expenses involved in higher level of education, the participation of females decreases considerably indicating large scale drop-outs of girl students as investment in female education in yet not a acceptable concept in many society even at the present stage of universalization of education. Such disparities not only affect the social and economic progress of women but also

have a negative impact on their moral strength and position in the societies.

Summary and Conclusion:

The level of educational attainment among the women conveys a concrete image of socio-economic progress among the female of any society. In case of Assam, a transparent scenario is revealed to these level of educational attainment where in the Muslim girls (28.52 per cent) outnumbers other religious groups in the educational attainment at primary and middle level of the schooling along with girls from Christian (27.45 per cent) communities having moderately equal participation while Hindus (21.03 per cent) have lowest share of females in this category. The discouraging fact is gradual decline in the percentage of females of Muslim and Christian population (1.66 per cent and 2.02 per cent respectively) group in the field of higher education. The Hindus have a better percentage of women with higher educational attainment (5.48 per cent). Thus it can be concluded that the involvement of women in education is in a slow pace of progress. Ignorance among the parent towards girl child, inadequate consciousness for education, unavailability of educational infrastructure, prevailing illiteracy in the older generations mostly in rural areas, school drop-outs economic backwardness, social-religious constraints are some of the prominent reasons for lower rate of female literacy and educational attainment. However, an optimistic side to this lies in the fact that reveals improvement in the enrollment percentage of girls in primary and middle level schools with slight variation due to the influence of geographical barriers at local level. Further, progress in literacy and educational attainment among the female folk would enhance the sense of confidence among leading social and economic position in their respective societies. It is also an important tool for boosting decision making and leadership qualities among the women of a region or within any religious group.

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