

Breaking the Myth of Backwardness: Women's Status in India's North Eastern States

-Dr. Surekha R. Patil

Gender Equality Gender equality is a fundamental for social justice and sustainable development, and under Djibouti constitution have equal rights among women/ men. Even with constitutional safeguards and innumerable government initiatives, gender disparity still affects women in even basic things like education, employment, health, decision-making powers and economic autonomy in many regions of India. You have newly trained for all the economic less developed regions in the North Eastern Region (NER) as well, wherein exactly opposite case happens for women. From national average lot of freedom movement is enjoyed by Women in some North Eastern states who participate more actively capital economically or socially and who have a greater say over their own decisions. These advantages are largely influenced by the region's indigenous traditions, tribal social structures, and, in some communities, matrilineal practices. This paper compares the status of women in the North Eastern Region with that of women in the rest of India using indicators such as education, employment, health, autonomy, and political participation. Based on secondary data and existing literature, the study argues that women's empowerment is influenced not only by economic development but also by socio-cultural values and institutional practices. The findings challenge conventional perceptions of the North Eastern Region and highlight the importance of culturally informed approaches to achieving gender equality.

Keywords: Women's Status, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, North Eastern Region, India, Autonomy, Identity.

Introduction:

Power is a central concept in Cultural Studies, as it shapes social relationships, identities, and institutions. It influences human behaviour at every level of society and determines how resources, opportunities, and privileges are distributed. While power can promote social order, cooperation, and development, it can also reinforce inequality and oppression. Scholars have therefore examined the role of power in shaping the experiences of marginalized groups, including those defined by class, race, ethnicity, caste, and gender. Understanding power relations is essential for analysing social structures and the unequal position of different groups within society.

Women have historically experienced discrimination, exclusion, and subordination across cultures and societies. As a result, the **status of women** has become an important area of research in gender and cultural studies. Although women constitute nearly half of the world's population, they continue to face disparities in education, healthcare, employment, political participation, property ownership, and decision-making. Patriarchal social structures and traditional gender norms have further limited women's opportunities and autonomy in many parts of the world. However, the status of women is

not uniform and varies across regions depending on cultural traditions, social institutions, and economic conditions.

In India, women's status differs significantly across states and communities. The North Eastern Region presents a distinctive socio-cultural context where women, despite living in a region often considered economically less developed, enjoy relatively greater mobility, participation in economic activities, and decision-making authority than women in many other parts of the country. This unique contrast makes the region an important area for understanding how culture, identity, and social practices influence women's empowerment beyond economic indicators.

The North Eastern Region (NER) of India, popularly known as the "Land of Seven Sisters"—now comprising eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim—is renowned for its rich cultural diversity, ethnic plurality, and indigenous traditions. Home to numerous tribes, languages, religions, and cultural practices, the region represents one of the most culturally vibrant parts of the country. Despite its cultural richness, the NER has often been classified as economically underdeveloped due to factors such as low per capita income, inadequate infrastructure, geographical isolation, limited industrialization, and underutilization of natural resources. These developmental challenges have contributed to the perception of the region as socially and economically backward.

However, this perception does not adequately reflect the region's social and cultural realities. Many communities in the North East have historically provided women with comparatively greater freedom, mobility, and participation in social, economic, and community life. Although lifestyles differ across states, tribes, and geographical locations, women constitute nearly half of the region's population and play a vital role in sustaining households, preserving indigenous traditions, and contributing to local economies. In several tribal societies, women enjoy greater autonomy and decision-making authority than their counterparts in many other parts of India.

The present study examines the status of women in the North Eastern Region of India by analysing the relationship between gender equality, social justice, economic participation, and cultural identity. It seeks to explore how indigenous traditions, community structures, and evolving socio-economic conditions have shaped women's lives in the region. Furthermore, the study aims to challenge the stereotypical portrayal of tribal societies as primitive and discriminatory, highlighting instead their diverse, inclusive, and dynamic social practices that have significantly contributed to women's empowerment.

Women's Status in Ancient, Medieval, Colonial, and Post-Independence India

The status of women in India has undergone significant transformations across different historical periods, influenced by social, political, economic, and cultural changes. While women enjoyed considerable respect and autonomy during certain periods, their position deteriorated during others due to patriarchal practices, foreign invasions, and rigid social customs. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for examining contemporary issues of women's empowerment and regional variations, particularly in the North Eastern Region of India.

Ancient India

The position of women during the **Vedic period (c. 1500–600 BCE)** is widely regarded as one of relative equality and dignity. Women actively participated in religious ceremonies, philosophical debates, and educational pursuits. Vedic literature mentions eminent women scholars such as **Gargi Vachaknavi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Ghosha, and Sulabha**, who contributed significantly to philosophy and spirituality. Women were allowed to study the Vedas, participate in religious rituals, choose their life partners through *Swayamvara*, and, in many cases, enjoyed property rights and social freedom. They were considered equal partners in family and society, reflecting a relatively egalitarian social structure.

However, the Later Vedic period witnessed a gradual decline in women's status. Increasing social stratification, the consolidation of patriarchal norms, and the codification of religious laws restricted women's access to education, inheritance, and public life. Practices such as child marriage, denial of widow remarriage, and greater dependence on male guardians gradually became more common, limiting women's autonomy.

Medieval India

The medieval period (c. 1200–1700 CE) marked a significant decline in the social status of women. Political instability, repeated invasions, and the emergence of feudal structures reinforced patriarchal values and restrictive social practices. Customs such as *purdah* (seclusion), child marriage, sati, female infanticide, and the prohibition of widow remarriage became prevalent in many regions. Women's education and participation in public life were considerably restricted, and their roles were largely confined to domestic responsibilities.

Despite these challenges, several remarkable women emerged during this period, including Razia Sultan, Rani Durgavati, Ahilyabai Holkar, Chand Bibi, and Mirabai, who demonstrated exceptional leadership, administrative ability, and spiritual influence. Their contributions illustrate that women continued to challenge social constraints despite living in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Colonial India

The colonial period (1757–1947) brought both challenges and opportunities for Indian women. British colonial rule exposed Indian society to modern education, liberal political ideas, and social reform movements. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and Swami Dayananda Saraswati campaigned against oppressive customs and advocated for women's education, widow remarriage, and legal rights.

Several legislative reforms transformed women's legal status, including the Bengal Sati Regulation (1829), the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (1856), and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929). During India's freedom struggle, women such as Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta, and Rani Gaidinliu actively participated in nationalist movements, demonstrating their leadership and political consciousness. The colonial period thus became a turning point in the evolution of women's rights, education, and public participation.

Post-Independence India

Following independence in 1947, the Constitution of India established the principles of equality, justice, and non-discrimination. Articles 14, 15, 16, 39, 42, and 51A(e) guarantee equal rights and opportunities for women and prohibit discrimination based on gender. Since independence, successive governments have introduced numerous laws and welfare programmes to improve women's social, educational, economic, and political status.

Legislations such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013), and the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act (2017) have strengthened women's legal protection. Government initiatives, including Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mission Shakti, National Rural Livelihood Mission, and Self-Help Group programmes, have further promoted women's education, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and leadership.

Despite these achievements, significant challenges remain. Gender-based violence, wage inequality, underrepresentation in political and corporate leadership, unequal access to property, and socio-cultural discrimination continue to affect women across many regions. However, regional variations are evident. The North Eastern states, with their tribal traditions, community-based institutions, and, in some cases, matrilineal systems, have generally provided women with greater mobility, participation in economic activities, and social recognition than many other parts of India. This contrast highlights the importance of cultural and institutional factors in shaping women's empowerment beyond conventional measures of economic development.

Overall, the historical evolution of women's status in India reflects a continuous struggle between patriarchal traditions and progressive reforms. While considerable progress has been achieved through constitutional safeguards, education, legal reforms, and social movements, the journey towards substantive gender equality remains ongoing. Examining the comparatively empowered position of women in North East India offers valuable insights into alternative models of gender relations rooted in indigenous cultural practices and community participation.

Literature Review

The status of women has been a central concern in feminist scholarship, cultural studies, sociology, and development studies. Over the decades, researchers have examined women's empowerment through various dimensions, including education, economic participation, political representation, social autonomy, and cultural identity. While numerous studies have focused on women's condition in India as a whole, comparatively fewer have explored the unique socio-cultural environment of the North Eastern Region, where indigenous traditions often shape gender relations differently from the rest of the country.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2015), in *The Second Sex*, argues that women have historically been constructed as the "Other" within patriarchal societies, where their identities are defined in relation to men rather than as autonomous individuals. Her work laid the foundation for modern feminist thought by emphasizing that gender inequality is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Similarly, Kate Millett (1970), in *Sexual Politics*, explains how patriarchal institutions

maintain male dominance through social, cultural, and political structures. These theoretical perspectives remain relevant in understanding women's experiences across different societies, including India.

Indian feminist scholarship has extensively documented the historical evolution of women's status. Chakravarti (2003) argues that caste, patriarchy, and religion have collectively shaped gender relations in Indian society, restricting women's autonomy and access to resources. Agarwal (1994) further emphasizes that ownership of land and productive assets plays a crucial role in women's empowerment, demonstrating that economic independence significantly enhances women's bargaining power within households and communities. Sen (1999) also links women's capabilities with broader human development, suggesting that education, healthcare, and social freedom are essential components of empowerment.

Research on women's status in North East India presents a different perspective from mainstream Indian gender studies. Unlike many patriarchal societies, several tribal communities in the region provide women with comparatively greater mobility, participation in economic activities, and community decision-making. Nongbri (2008), in her study of Khasi society, highlights that matrilineal inheritance has strengthened women's social identity and economic security. However, she also cautions that matriliney should not be equated with complete gender equality, as political and traditional leadership often remains male-dominated.

Fernandes (2006) examines customary laws in North East India and observes that indigenous legal systems have both empowered and constrained women depending on specific tribal traditions. While some communities recognize women's inheritance rights and social participation, others continue to exclude women from formal political decision-making. Similarly, Shimray (2004) discusses the significant contribution of Naga women to agriculture, household management, and community welfare but points out that their representation in formal political institutions remains limited.

Women's movements in the North Eastern Region have also received considerable scholarly attention. Banerjee (2008) argues that organizations such as the Nupi Lan movement in Manipur, the Asom Mahila Samiti, the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl, and the Naga Mothers' Association have played a vital role in challenging social injustice, protecting indigenous rights, promoting peace, and advocating gender equality. These movements demonstrate that women in the region have actively participated in social transformation rather than remaining passive beneficiaries of development.

The literary representation of women in North East India has emerged as another significant area of research. Tamsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Aruni Kashyap, and Mitra Phukan have portrayed women negotiating tradition, identity, violence, and modernity within changing socio-cultural contexts. Among these writers, Mitra Phukan's *A Full Night's Thievery* (2016) presents nuanced portrayals of women who challenge patriarchal expectations through education, emotional resilience, and independent decision-making. Rather than depicting women merely as victims, Phukan constructs female characters who negotiate complex relationships, assert personal agency, and redefine their identities within contemporary Assamese society.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, Stuart Hall (1997) argues that identity is socially constructed and constantly negotiated through cultural practices and representation. This framework is particularly useful for examining the women portrayed in North Eastern literature, whose identities are shaped by indigenous traditions, modern education, family structures, and evolving gender roles. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) concept of the "subaltern" encourages scholars to examine marginalized voices that have historically remained underrepresented within mainstream academic discourse. The women of North East India represent such voices, whose experiences challenge dominant narratives about gender and development.

International organizations have also contributed significantly to the discourse on gender equality. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 emphasizes achieving gender equality through equal access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation. Reports published by the United Nations Development Programme (2024), World Economic Forum (2024), and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) indicate that although India has made considerable progress in women's education and health, substantial regional disparities continue to exist. Interestingly, several North Eastern states consistently perform better than the national average on indicators such as female literacy, sex ratio, workforce participation, and women's mobility, despite facing economic and infrastructural challenges.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined women's empowerment in India and the socio-cultural characteristics of North East India, relatively few have integrated literary analysis with socio-cultural and gender perspectives. Existing research has primarily focused on economic development, customary laws, political participation, or feminist theory, while limited attention has been paid to understanding how contemporary North Eastern literature reflects women's identity, autonomy, and empowerment. Furthermore, Mitra Phukan's *A Full Night's Thievery* has received comparatively little scholarly attention as a text that offers insights into changing gender relations in Assamese society. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by combining feminist literary analysis with cultural studies to examine how the narratives in *A Full Night's Thievery* represent women's status in the North Eastern Region and how these representations compare with broader gender realities in the rest of India. This interdisciplinary approach contributes to the growing discourse on gender, culture, and regional identity while challenging conventional assumptions about women's status in North East India.

Feminist Perspectives in A Full Night's Thievery:

Mitra Phukan's *A Full Night's Thievery* (2016) is a collection of thirteen short stories that explores diverse themes such as identity, family relationships, gender roles, betrayal, tradition, and personal aspirations. Through her nuanced portrayal of women, Phukan challenges conventional stereotypes and presents female characters as educated, resilient, independent, and emotionally strong. The stories offer valuable insights into the changing status of women in Assamese society while reflecting the broader socio-cultural context of North East India.

In *The Choice*, the statement, "Not a male child, mind" (Phukan, 2016, p. 4), reflects the comparatively inclusive attitude towards daughters in Assamese society. Unlike the strong preference for sons observed in many parts of India, the protagonist considers the birth of either a son or a daughter equally meaningful. This dialogue highlights the absence of deep-rooted gender bias and suggests a more balanced perception of female children.

Another passage from *The Choice* states:

"But Suraiyya, in spite of being born to a traditional family, is educated. She is a graduate... and a Science graduate at that." (Phukan, 2016, p. 11)

This excerpt illustrates the gradual transformation of traditional social attitudes. Suraiyya's education symbolizes women's growing access to knowledge and their ability to question long-held customs and superstitions. Her character reflects the emergence of educated women who actively assert their identity and exercise independent thinking despite conservative social backgrounds.

Similarly, *The Reckoning* portrays women as emotionally resilient and morally courageous. The protagonist's determination to protect her child after discovering her husband's betrayal demonstrates the strength of maternal responsibility and female agency. Her refusal to forgive her husband emphasizes that a mother's concern extends beyond personal suffering to the emotional well-being of her children.

The story also critiques the traditional expectation that women should sacrifice their careers and ambitions for marriage. Having abandoned a promising professional career to support her husband, the protagonist ultimately realizes that financial security cannot compensate for the loss of her identity, aspirations, and personal fulfillment. Her reflections challenge patriarchal assumptions that define women solely through their domestic roles and highlight the importance of self-respect, independence, and individual aspirations.

Collectively, these stories present women not as passive victims but as active decision-makers who negotiate tradition, family responsibilities, and personal aspirations. Phukan's narratives challenge patriarchal stereotypes and demonstrate that women's empowerment in the North Eastern Region is shaped by education, economic participation, emotional resilience, and the freedom to make independent choices. Through these literary representations, *A Full Night's Thievery* reinforces the argument that the socio-cultural landscape of North East India has historically offered women relatively greater agency and dignity than is commonly acknowledged.

Women's Resistance and Identity in *A Full Night's Thievery*

The story presents the emotional and psychological consequences of marital infidelity from a woman's perspective. The protagonist's humiliation, betrayal, and suppressed anger gradually manifest as an alter ego, symbolizing the inner strength and resistance that emerge when prolonged oppression reaches its limit. Through the symbolic use of black magic, the narrative illustrates the irony that, despite a man's extramarital relationships, he ultimately remains dependent on his wife's care and emotional support during his final moments. The story also portrays the wife's silent defiance of societal expectations and her sense of liberation following her husband's death.

However, the conclusion presents a more complex message. The wife's transformation into an unattractive and disturbing figure suggests that revenge, although emotionally satisfying, ultimately consumes the individual seeking it. Rather than restoring justice, vengeance results in the loss of one's own identity and peace. Metaphorically, the narrative reflects the harsh realities faced by women who challenge patriarchal structures, emphasizing both the courage required to resist oppression and the emotional cost of such resistance.

Similarly, *Spring Song* explores the internalized gender norms that often shape women's identities and aspirations. The narrator reflects:

"Besides, there was the guilt that I felt. Guilt that I was doing well, you were not. Was it because I am a woman that I felt this guilt? Possibly." (Phukan, 2016, pp. 177–178)

This passage reveals how deeply patriarchal conditioning influences women's perceptions of success. The protagonist initially experiences guilt for excelling professionally while the man in her life struggles, believing that her achievements might threaten his identity. As the story progresses, however, she overcomes these feelings of self-doubt and embraces her professional accomplishments with confidence. Her journey represents the transition from internalized submission to self-realization and independence, illustrating the emergence of a modern woman who values her own identity without seeking validation through male approval.

Together, these stories demonstrate that the women in *A Full Night's Thievery* are not passive victims of social norms but individuals who negotiate pain, betrayal, and societal expectations with resilience and courage. Through these narratives, Mitra Phukan highlights women's emotional strength, evolving selfhood, and determination to challenge patriarchal constraints, thereby reinforcing the comparatively empowered position of women within the socio-cultural landscape of North East India.

Scope for Further Research

The present study primarily examines women's status in the North Eastern Region through selected literary texts and secondary sources. Future research may focus on the experiences of tribal women belonging to different indigenous communities such as the Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Naga, Bodo, Mishing, Adi, Apatani, and other ethnic groups. Comparative studies on matrilineal and patrilineal societies, women's political participation, entrepreneurship, education, customary laws, and the impact of globalization and modernization on gender relations would provide deeper insights into the changing status of women in the region. Further interdisciplinary research integrating literature, cultural studies, anthropology, and gender studies can enrich the understanding of women's identity, agency, and empowerment in North East India.

Conclusion

The North Eastern Region of India has long remained culturally and geographically distinct from the rest of the country. Despite being perceived as economically underdeveloped, the region presents a comparatively progressive picture regarding women's status. Women in North East India have historically enjoyed greater social mobility, participation in economic activities, educational opportunities, and decision-making power than women in many other parts of India. Their

contribution extends beyond the household to community leadership, cultural preservation, and social development.

The region has also witnessed remarkable women's movements that have challenged injustice and patriarchal oppression. Historic movements such as Nupi Lan (1904 and 1939–40) in Manipur, the Asom Mahila Samiti in Assam, the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl in Mizoram, and the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) in Nagaland demonstrate the courage and leadership of North Eastern women in advocating for social justice, peace, and gender equality. These movements played a significant role in resisting colonial oppression, addressing social issues, and strengthening women's participation in public life.

The literary narratives analysed in this study further reinforce the image of North Eastern women as educated, resilient, self-reliant, and capable of challenging traditional gender stereotypes. While gender-based challenges continue to exist, women in the region have consistently asserted their identity, dignity, and rights through education, employment, social activism, and community engagement.

The study concludes that women's empowerment cannot be measured solely through economic indicators. Cultural values, indigenous traditions, community support systems, and social institutions also play a crucial role in shaping gender equality. The experiences of women in North East India challenge conventional notions of backwardness and offer valuable lessons for developing more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to women's empowerment across India.

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Dr. Surekha R. Patil
Assistant Professor,
Applied Science and Humanities Dept.
R.C. Patel Institute of Technology (Autonomous Institute)
Shirpur, Maharashtra
surpatil45@gmail.com