

Has Education Transformed Muchi Women's Lives?

A Study of Cachar District in Assam

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This article is a study to understand the impact of education on the overall development of Muchi women in Cachar district, Assam. Does education propel women towards greater political participation or is it appropriated by the dominant groups?

Introduction

Muchi women^[i] in Assam were historically denied access to formal education due to the vicious circle of caste and gender. Education has a positive correlation with the development and participation of an individual as revealed in a number of previous studies.

The primary objective of this article is to explore the inter-generational educational patterns of the Muchi women of Cachar. The study^[ii] will also find out whether there existed a gender gap in education, if any, among the Muchis of Cachar and also analyse the impact of education on the overall development of Muchi women.

Socio-demographic Profile of Muchi Women

Muchis, one of the 16 Dalit communities of Cachar, are an offshoot of the primitive Chamar caste whose origins can be traced back to the non-Aryan “untouchable” occupational groups of India. Their principle occupation is that of tanners of leather, preparers of skins, manufacturers of leather articles and makers of shoes (Briggs 1921). The Muchis, mostly migrants from Bengal, Bihar and Odisha, were employed by the British in tea plantations in Cachar. They are divided into Bengali speaking (prefer to call themselves as *Bardhamani*) and Hindi speaking groups (prefer to call themselves *Deswali*).

Presently, the Muchis constitute 3.9 % of the total scheduled caste (SC) population of Assam whose highest SC population is concentrated in the Bengali dominated district of Cachar (14.4%). [As per the 2001 census](#), there is a discernable gap between the Muchi males (60.4%) and Muchi females (34.2%) so far as the literacy rate is concerned. The overall literacy rate of the community which stands at 50.6% shows the extent of hegemonic caste based discrimination prevalent in the district. To be more precise, while the Muchis in general are victimised by the presence of casteist norms; in particular, the women of the

community are victimised by casteist as well as gendered patriarchal structures.

Generational Change

The Muchi women of Cachar undoubtedly live in intense backwardness emanating from their economic status, which is again the result of their poor educational levels. [Data regarding three generations](#): old generation (grandparent), middle generation (parent) and young generation (child) had been collected, each of which had again been split under the categories—male and female, in order to explore the extent of gender based discrimination within the community.

The study revealed that the literacy rate of the Muchi women in Cachar has improved over the decades. However there is a high prevalence of dropouts at the primary level among the younger generation girls. Not a single girl was found to have passed the board exams conducted in the 10th standard. Another point to be marked is that there was a gap between the sexes as far as the educational pattern is considered. Girls were found to be more likely to drop out of schools due to economic or other related problems as was found in a number of cases.

It was found that those who received primary education were slowly moving out of caste occupations ([Table 2](#)) of cobbling to work as painter and wage earners. However, the occupational trend of the females showed no major change in their choice of work as house maids. The younger generation is more likely to be engaged in no occupation as they are married off early.

Education and Political Participation

It needs to be stressed that education, though empowering, had little impact on the social mobility of Muchi women. It was also seen that enabling environments at home and the surrounding neighbourhood, rather than government bodies were more helpful in furthering educational opportunities.

The study revealed that there was little political awareness among women, majority of who are illiterate. Other than the name of the local representatives, none of the women were aware of the names of the chief minister, governor, or the president. All of these adversely affect their levels of political participation, defined as a citizen's active involvement with public institutions, which include voting, candidacy, campaigning, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or through membership in a group (Rai 2011).

The study revealed ([Table 3](#)) that a majority of Muchi women had no political participation in the district. Not a single member of the community was found to be a member of local political institutions like the municipality (the area comes under Silchar Municipal Corporation). Contesting the panchayat elections remained a distant dream for the community members, especially the women. This not only uncovers the degree of

equality/inequality and liberty they enjoy in sharing political power with their male counterparts, but also the space provided to them within the democratic framework of the country.

It would be significant here to mention that some of the women who participated in formal politics, did so not out of their political consciousness but due to certain other reasons. They often received money from the political parties—Rs 300 for 5-7 days of work, or sometimes Rs 100 in 1-2 days. The rate of this compensation went up in concurrence with the importance of the poll. Their choice of party was largely dependent on the decisions of the male members within the family. To sum up, in the case of these women, education appeared to have a negative correlation with modes of participation like voting and campaigning.

Conclusion

The inter-generational educational patterns of the Muchi women of Cachar revealed that like Dalit women elsewhere, these women were also the underdeveloped whole of the society. Their poor educational levels not only denied them good employment opportunities required for economic development and empowerment, but also hindered their process of political awareness, consciousness and participation required for their political development. This does not augur well for the health of the democracy that is dependant on the active participation of marginalised groups.

Notes

[i] Historically both the Dalits and women were denied access to education, the most underprivileged of who are the Dalit women, and this is clear from these verses of Manusmriti, 1) “Shudras are not entitled to education, to amass wealth, or bear arms. A Brahman can take away any possession from a Shudra since nothing at all can belong to him as his own”. 2) “Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskaras are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth”. (Verse IX.18)

[ii] The study has been conducted on Silchar, the main town of Cachar focusing mainly on one Muchi colony of the district. Due to limited secondary sources, it is basically based on primary data which includes door to door survey of the total Muchi houses, personal interview of the sample women using a pre-structured interview schedule and observation techniques. A total of 31 sampled middle aged married women between the age group 26 to 38 have been selected for interview in order to have information about all the three generations which include their mothers of old generations and their daughters of the younger generations, encompassing a total of 105 women from all the three generations,

numbering 31, 31 and 43 respectively. To explore the gender discrimination in education (if any) educational information regarding their father, husband and sons numbering 31, 31 and 26 respectively has also been collected.

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