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**Socio-economic status of women in Northeast India: Causes and
consequences of domestic violence against women in Assam: Case analysis**

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INTRODUCTION: -

Domestic violence of all forms against women is on rise in the state capital of Assam, Guwahati. And keeping pace with the state capital, these atrocities are highly increasing in the place of both upper and lower Assam.

Domestic Violence is an act of physical, sexual or psychological abuse, or the threat of such abuse, inflicted against women by a person intimately connected to her through marriage, family relation or acquaintanceship is universal and has its root in the socio-cultural set up of the society. Domestic violence refers to violence against women especially in matrimonial homes. Starting from childhood to the end of her life she has to be under the control of father, husband or the son. The perpetrator of domestic violence has often been found to be the males and the victims, their sexual partners. Yet in many cases of Domestic Violence, single women both unmarried and widow becomes the victims of mental and physical exploitation in the private domain.

Especially in the state of Assam, Domestic violence against unmarried women both in the rural and semi rural and urban areas can be seen. They occur in high frequency in all parts of the state. Likewise marital rape and destitution of women, which leads to trafficking and forced prostitution, are also serious issues in the state. ¹

¹ Harihar Sahoo and Manas Ranjan Pradhan, Domestic Violence in India: An Empirical Analysis.

To support this argument, number of cases are studied and analyzed based on both primary and secondary data.

OBJECTIVES: -

The basic objective of this paper is to find out the causes of marital rape, destitution, domestic violence against single women and their consequences in the lives of women in Assam.

METHODOLOGY:-

The methodology used here has both primary and secondary data.

CASES: -

- **MARITAL RAPE:** -

Marital rape also known as spousal rape is non-consensual sex in which the perpetrator is the victims' spouse. It is a form of partner rape, of domestic violence and of sexual abuse. It can damage equally, or even more, emotionally and physically than rape done by a stranger. In many states like Assam spousal rape either remains legal or is illegal but widely tolerated.

Case 1: -

In the year 2010, a housewife in Jorhat district of Assam became the victim of marital rape. Her husband allegedly abused her sexually for dowry. It is also said that she was abused also for giving birth to two-girl child. Later on, she was found dead in her own house very

mysteriously. It was reported that her husband and in laws combined together and immolated her. Due to protest by various women rights organization he was arrested, but soon was freed.

Case 2: -

A professor confesses that she has been a victim of marital rape a long back. Her alcoholic husband is a reputed physician in the district. The problem of egoism between the couple and the differences in their lifestyle has cause severe disturbances as a result of which the wife is consequently raped and assaulted mentally by her husband. She also confessed that she could not complain this due to the societal taboos.

Case 3: -

Meena Das, who is serving as a cook in one of the private hostels in Dibrugarh district conveyed that she too is a victim of marital rape. The poor woman has two children and her husband is unemployed. He is also an alcoholic, which makes him violent enough to sexually molest his wife. Out of fear she has never reported the case to the police. She also said that her neighbor is unsupportive and that now she is very used to it.

The first observation from the above-mentioned cases is that all of them are unreported. The social recognition of marital rape is very important; rather it is more important than legal recognition. Because of the absence of social recognition this has become very difficult for the victims of marital rape to speak about it. These victims in Assam hesitate to talk about it because the act of marital rape has not attained the status of rape. This prohibits them from speaking out against their exploitation. They believe that there is no point talking or telling others about their oppression. Thus they stay in double dilemma.

In these cases, the class of women does not play any role in prohibiting or facilitating marital rape in Assam. Here Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics" can be mentioned. Her explanation of class women can be identified with the above three cases where women of all classes are exploited equally regardless of their economic status in the society. The cook in the private hostel is a victim of marital rape likewise the assistant professor of a college. Economic independence, though very essential is not alone sufficient to give women the strength needed to face the battle. Even economically independent women have to depend on their parents or husbands or relatives for shelter because of past long traditions of public private dichotomy.² Thus their effort to upgrade their status in the society cannot protect them within the four walls of the house.

Also, they fear social taboos. As the most vulnerable social categories, their spouses exploit these women. They cannot protest as the society prohibits from doing so. The fear of persecution from their home and the larger society facilitates their vulnerability towards marital rape. Thus both the educated and uneducated women simply surrender to the situation.

The family is often equated with sanctuary— a place where individuals seek love, safety, security, and shelter. But the evidence shows that it is also a place that imperils lives, and breeds some of the most drastic forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls. Males who are, or who have been, in positions of trust and intimacy and power usually perpetrate violence in the domestic sphere. Sexual abuse and rape by an intimate partner is not considered a crime, and many societies do not consider forced sex as rape if they are

² "Women Status In Assam", Dr. M. Tineshowri Devi

married to, or cohabiting with, the perpetrator. The assumption is that once a woman enters into a contract of marriage, the husband has the right to unlimited sexual access to his wife. ³

In two of these cases, the victims were unaware of the legal provisions available for their safeguards. Because of the vague laws regarding marital rape in India, it is difficult to educate women about their rights. And thus it is more difficult to make them fight against marital rape.

Husbands also do this because they believe that the women are their private property. Here Friedrich Engels in his book “The Origin of Family, Private Property and State” clearly mentions how the origin of private property leads to the subordination of the wife to the husband. Hence, it is a popular believe that the husband owns her wife, the wife is reduce to the status of slave and therefore he can naturally use her for his sexual pleasure, even if it requires the use of force. This age old practice has led to the nonconsensual sexual intercourse in all the three cases. The partner also knows that the wife is not going to complain, and even if she does it will remain unattended. Therefore, he can commit rape without any fear and also without realizing the gravity of his act at many times.

The societal patriarchy affects psychology of the husband in such a way that in order to proof or revitalized his ‘manhood’, he subjugates his wife by exploiting her in the sexual domain, which can be reflected in case 3. Thus the superior-subordinate relationship created by patriarchy in the private domain is also responsible among the economically downtrodden couple.

³ Domestic violence against women and girl, No . 6 - J u n e 2 0 0 0, UNICEF

- **DOWRY**: -

Dowry has been a major cause of concern amongst the predominantly Bengali majority areas in Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. In North East Network's (NEN) recent visit to Lunding town which has a strong Bengali majority, the Director of Ghorua, a Non Governmental Organisation, reported that dowry deaths have become a scourge in the area.

Case 1: -

Malati Dev's in-laws started demanding dowry and physically torturing her within fifteen days of marriage. She bore everything silently because she was new to that family. Later the neighbor arranged a Panchayat meeting after seeing her pitiable condition and the Panchayat ordered Narayan's [her husband's] family not to torture her. But his family did not heed the order and the torture continued. When she could not bear it, she went to her sister's house. When her husband did not come to take her back, her sister persuaded Malati to go back to his home. One day her father-in-law strangulated her for not going to work as she was in fever, which resulted in hospitalizing her. Her husband refused money for the treatment and even planned for second marriage. The Panchayat advised Narayan to stay separately with Malati. Narayan agreed at that time, but he did not bring Malati back from her sister's house where she still lives. She does not want a divorce, as she is afraid of living alone.

(Source: NEN Field Study)

Case 2: -

Mafusa Begam of Silchar married Basiruddin in 2001. At the wedding, her brother gave a huge sum of money as dowry. After the marriage, Mafusa discovered that her husband had a relationship with another girl with whom he married in the court. With the help of her brother Mafusa got the marriage annulled. Following this, her husband, mother-in-law and father-in-law began to physically torture her and demanded a scooter and Rs. 50,000 from her family.

Mafusa finally approached the District Level Committee for Crimes Involving Women, a woman's organization in Silchar. The organization issued a notice to Basiruddin, following which the torture increased. Basiruddin threatened to remarry. In September 2003, he married his uncle's daughter. Mufasa approached the Sonai Police Station but till date the police has taken no action. (Source: NEN Field Study)

From the above cases it can be analyzed that dowry is the mean to fulfill husbands and their relative's consumable greed by means of marriage. As our social structure is very much patriarchal in nature, women from their very childhood remain dependent economically and psychologically upon the male members of the family. This dependency curtails them from breaking their brutal marriage and thus women face continuous physical and psychological trauma during their marriage life. Women who cannot bring dowry to their house are often beaten, burnt alive and are threatened for their survival. They still do not leave their house because of economic dependency, fear of outside world, lack of knowledge about their rights, children, lack of confidence, social pressure and stigma, lack of support, of structures and facilities. A woman who dares to leave their matrimonial house is often not sure that their mothers' house will accept them. Even their acceptance is not for a long while as they feel

that the battered women would be a burden to them. Thus the women ultimately have to move to their husband's house without their choice. As in the case of Malati, she went to her sister's house but was again sent back to her husband's house in spite of tortures she faced. This was because of the social stigma and economic dependency attached with the social structure of the society. Moreover, in both the cases, the government's role was not as active as it should be as it failed to save women from continuation of domestic violence with proper legislation. In the absence of proper legislation, the police administration is not in a situation to legitimate action against the reported domestic crime. It is note worthy here to mention that police administration does not give emphasis on domestic violence thinking it to be private matter and advices the victim to solve their issues within the four walls of the house.

- **DESTITUTE WOMEN:** -

One of the most common forms of domestic violence is driving the victim out of her home. Such women often have nowhere else to go to.

The following cases illustrate how parents often force their daughters to go back to their abusive husband and resist taking legal action, even after the husband or his family members have tried to murder her.

Case 1: -

Maya and her husband Shantanu lived with their three children in Silchar. Right after the Marriage, Shantanu began physically and mentally abusing his wife and accused her of having extra-marital affairs with several other men. He would often throw her and the

children out of the house, sometimes in the middle of the night. Shantanu also appealed for divorce but Maya did not want the same because of insecurity in her future life. (Source: NEN Field Study)

Case 2: -

One year after Makon Thakur's marriage, her mother-in-law and husband both started torturing her physically and mentally. One day, after being thrown out of the house, she went to her parent's house. Her parents brought her back to her in laws. Her mother-in-law then kicked her out, and abused her parents. (Source: NEN Field Study)

Case 3: -

Rubna, who hails from the village of Rupahi in Nagaon District lost her parents in her childhood and was brought up by her brother and sister. She was married, but left her husband due to the physical and mental torture from him, and returned to her sister's place to stay. Taking the opportunity of her plight, one guy lured her of getting a good job in Pune, and subsequently sold her in a brothel of Pune. (Source: NEN Field Study)

From the above cases it can be said that, Makon's parents were reluctant to take her back into their house because she was seen as an additional burden on the family. Moreover, if there are younger female siblings in the house, then women are actively discouraged from leaving the husband, because it is seen as affecting the chances of the younger siblings getting married. If the couple has young children, women often opt to stay in the abusive

relationship, because she feels that the stigma of being a single mother may affect the children.

Similarly Maya also did not want to leave her husband in spite of his abusive behavior. Suspicion of having extra marital affairs was also the cause of domestic violence, which brought physical, sexual and psychological abuse to Maya's life. The threat of being thrown out brought millions of women to silently bear extreme violence, sometimes till the point of death at the hands of their relatives.

Thus, from Rubna's case it can be said that she left her husbands' house because of domestic violence but felt herself economically dependent on her sister's income. Traffickers who lured them for good job and bring them to the world of prostitution often misuse this trauma of dependency. Women who always remained in the private domain are suddenly brought out to public world where they are ignorant of what is good for them and what is bad which ultimately bring their life to a prostitute or sexual object.⁴

- **SINGLE WOMEN:-**

- 1. UNMARRIED SINGLE WOMEN:**

⁴ IUAES2013, PANEL MMM02, TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN IN ASSAM, INDIA: STATUS AND CHALLENGES.

Unmarried single woman have a tough time and are often subject to violence and abuse as they are seen as an additional burden. They, almost never, have a share in the family property or a say in family matters.

Case 1: -

Lakhi Buragohain, a 27-year-old resident of Sibsagar, lives with her mother, elder brother and his wife in a house built by her father. Lakhi and her mother support themselves from the pension of her late father, but that money is not enough for them to survive. As an unmarried girl in the family, her elder brother looks upon her as an additional burden and does not contribute towards her maintenance. When she asked for her share of property to ensure a smooth life for her mother and herself, her brother and sister-in-law physically assaulted her. When she approached her neighbors, she was told that she was selfish and materialistic because she was thinking of asking for a share in the family property. It has become exceedingly difficult for Lakhi to live at home, because of excessive physical and mental abuse by her brother and his wife. (Source: NEN Field Study)

Case 2: -

In deals with an unmarried woman of 42 years of age, working as a cook in one of the private hostels in Dibrugarh. Because of her unmarried status she is looked down upon by the neighbor and also by her own family members. Her brother and sister in law assault her not only mentally but physically also. Her brother very often beats her up. Her sister in law also tortures her by making her do all the domestic work. (Source: NEN field study)

Thus from these cases it can be remarked that a single women, no matter how productive and independent, is always given inferior status both at home and in the society. In the above case the cook though economically productive and independent is oppressed domestically by her own sibling and other relatives just because she is not married. Thus her status in her own house is reduced to the minimum. Also, because her own people ridicule her, the outsider takes this opportunity as a mean to exploiting her both mentally and sexually. She confessed that she has been a victim of eve teasing and molestation by the local men. The presence of patriarch in the house makes her both physically and emotionally weak and vulnerable. She loses her self-confidence and dignity. Thus, she also loses the opportunities for a self-esteemed and self-sufficient life.

2. WIDOWS:

Widows are another group of women who are extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

Case 1: -

Nandini, a resident of Silchar, has been a widow for five years. The last five years have been very difficult for her. After her husband's death, she had to struggle to get a job to keep herself alive. She started working as a housemaid, but had to move on when the owner's son sexually assaulted her. Men often come and ask if she is willing to have sex for money. On refusal, they sometimes try to force themselves on her. (Source: NEN Field Study)

Case 2: -

Polomi Dey was married to Tapan Dey, a driver, from Shantigram, Cachar District of Assam. Three years after the marriage, when he died in an accident, his parents, elder brother and sister accused her of being the cause of his death and bringing bad-luck to the family. They started physically and mentally torturing her. They also blamed Polomi's son for the demise of Tapan. They began to deny food to both Polomi and her son. After few days she with her son was thrown from the house and thus went to her brothers' house. Her sister-in-law was unhappy with her presence and often tortures her and beats her in her brother's absence but Polomi bears everything silently as she know that life of outside world is much more difficult for survival.

Thus it can be said that life of a single women is open to different types of violence where the perpetrator is either the relative of husband or the strangers with whom the women come in contact with for jobs. The society has given single women a very inferior position where she is often thought to be sex object, bad luck and additional burden. From the above cases it can be said that women either have to remain silent and bear violence to have a home to live in or to bear physical assault and societal abuse for demanding property rights. Thus, a single woman attains a very low status in society, as she is economically dependent on the male of the family. Though property rights of women in India are recently legalized yet, they do not enjoy the fruits of their property rights. Women who approach for property rights are often criticized for being greedy and materialistic in nature. Status of women deteriorate in home as well as in society as they do not have property either in their paternal or matrimonial house which ultimately gives high economic status to man and low and dependent status to women. Thus it can be said that an alcoholic and unconscious man becomes the owner and proprietor of the property but a women who is sane enough to look

after the family and house is regarded as incapable to maintain or own the family property. Moreover, the patriarchal socialization internalizes every woman in such a way that she does not claim property rights for herself assuming that she does not require so.⁵

OVERALL ANALYSIS: -

Economic abuse is yet another form of domestic violence against women. It is the result of dependency- objective, subjective or both. The major forms of economic abuse are preventing a woman from taking a job, forcing her to leave the existing job, collecting full amount of her salary under force, pressurizing her for bringing money from her parents' family again and again and prohibiting her from making purchases of her choice. The causes of domestic violence as reported by the women respondents were parents' failure to pay full amount of dowry, refusal to bring money from patriarchal family, parents' failure to keep promises and fulfill commitments made at the time of marriage, extra marital relations, resistance to sexual abuse, medically unfit for conception, female-child is delivered every time, husband's unemployment, and alcoholic husband. Thus it can be said that single cause was not the root of violence in all cases but a mix of causes were observed in sufficiently large number of cases. The parents and relatives in maximum cases advised the victims to patch up, whereas advice to break off was not recommended by anyone. The domestic

⁵ Violence against women in north east india – an enquiry pdf, NEN (NORTHEAST NETWORK)

violence against married women perpetrated by their husbands or other family members spoiled the cordial intra-family relations. The maltreatment given to the mother had an adverse effect on the life of the children losing their respect for parents and other elderly persons in the family. The women of younger age and particularly those who were married at a lower age are at higher risk of being physically abused as compared to those who are in higher age group and were married at a later age. As against, these women of upper age group are more likely to be abused emotionally as compared with those in lower age group. Physical violence is mostly reported from rural areas in lower class families and also from urban areas in lower and middle class families. As against this the cases of emotional violence are mainly found in urban areas and that too in middle class and upper class families. The economic abuse is executed along with other forms of domestic violence and is observed more in rural areas and lower class families of urban areas.⁶

CONCLUSION: -

It is painful to note that in spite of theoretical constitutional equality for all (men & women); separate personal laws ensure that men and women are not equal. Male guardianship prevails even today and `marriage` for women translates into subordination in ways it does not for men. Such paradoxes in the formal and informal areas continue to exclude women from an equal footing with men in free India. It is a fact that domestic violence against women is universal across the culture, religion, class and ethnicity. This hidden nature of domestic violence against women remains so due to the social construction

⁶ stdy_demvion pdf

of the divide between public and private affairs. The law has historically considered the domain of the house to be within the control and unquestionable authority of the male-head of the household. It is to be conceptualized as an intra-family conflict or a criminal violation of rights.