

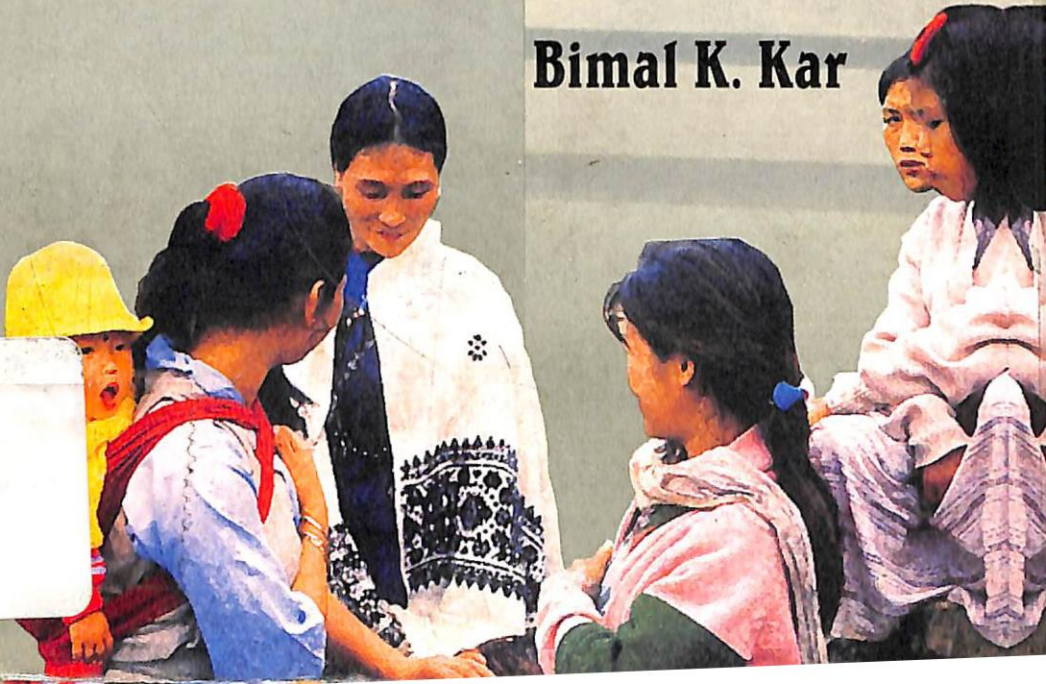
# Women Population of North East India

A Study in Gender Geography

Bimal K. Kar



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A STUDY IN GENDER GEOGRAPHY



**BIMAL K. KAR**  
Department of Geography  
Gauhati University



*Regency Publications*  
New Delhi

Call No. 306.88082095V16  
Acc. No. 7632

Division of  
**DAYA PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
4760-61/23, Ansari Road,  
Darya Ganj, New Delhi - 110 002  
Phone: 23245578, 23244987; Fax: (011) 23260116  
E-mail: info@regency-books.com  
Website: www.regencybooks.com

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ISBN 81-87498-58-7

Published by Regency Publications, 20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008 and printed at Radiant Printers, New Delhi 110 008; Phones: 574 0038, 571 2539, 406 0485; Telefax: 578 3571

Email: regency@satyam.net.in

## Foreword

The present work on 'Women Population of North-East India' by Dr. B.K. Kar, Reader in Geography, Gauhati University is basically the product of his research carried out under my guidance during 1992-1999. I am immensely happy to see the work in printed form and to write a foreword to it.

Women studies including gender issues are now emerging as a potential research frontier in the field of geography. While the studies on the role and status of women over space continue, present emphasis is noticeably on gender issues. To what extent is the gender phenomenon socially and culturally constructed and the inequality between the two sexes prevalent, why do people differentiate 'between man and woman, though they belong to the same human species, and why is women empowerment necessary for balanced development in a society, are the major concerns of the present study. The work done by Dr. Kar on 'Socio-economic characteristics of women population in North-East India' belongs to this genre of research, the emphasis of course being on presentation of the socio-economic characteristics of women in the region rather on its fallout including gender issues.

The work comprises eight chapters including the Introduction and the Synthesis. The aspects investigated here are the spatial patterns of demographic, social and economic characteristics of women in North-East India as indicated by different variables belonging to these three categories of characteristics. The variables have then been integrated to assess the socio-economic position of women in different parts of the region, and finally to look at the processes behind the prevailing situation. The study is mainly based on secondary data. However, primary level data from a few selected villages

and urban centres have also been used to cross-check the results obtained from the former.

The study begins with a sound proposition with well defined objectives and methods. The findings derived at the end have significance, inasmuch as they present a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic position of women in the region. As a matter of fact, the work is a pioneering one in the field of geography in North-East India and it opens up new vistas for further research. A merit of the work that deserves commendation is the judicious methodology and technique mix. Throughout, the study has been supported by a large number of clear, effective, and legibly produced maps and graphs, besides logically prepared tables in each section of the work. The nicety of the work, in addition, lies in the systematic presentation and analysis of the issues by following the required norms of a well-formulated research design.

The study on the whole makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of socio-economic position of women in North-East India. It should, however, be taken into account that the status of women is such an issue that its real character cannot be understood only through quantitative measurements. Rather the specifics of the problem have to be looked at the grass-root level and to what extent the status is socially and culturally constructed has to be critically examined to bring out the real answer to the problem. The work leaves open such questions to be answered by future researchers in this field.

I do hope that this work will pave the way for future research in this direction in North-East India at all macro and micro spatial unit levels and draw attention of the academic world as a valuable research piece in the field of women studies.

July 26, 2002

H.N. Sharma

## Preface

Woman which forms an integral part of any society and culture is often underestimated and discriminated in different forms in many respects. Many a time the contribution of women is either not given due attention or marginalized while formulating socio-economic development plans. Being characterized by tradition of sex discrimination and social stratification, the Indian women also occupy a place subordinate to men in many occasions. The situation in this respect in North-East India is also no less true. Having influenced by unique physical, racial and socio-cultural diversities quite different from the rest of the country, the North-East India witnesses a great variation in socio-economic conditions of women in both spatial and social terms. In this book an effort is made to present the various dimensions of socio-economic conditions of women population in North-East India in a comprehensive way from gender geography perspective. The study, so far hitherto remained un-attempted in this part of the country, analyses the demographic and socio-economic position of women in the region focusing on spatial, social and locational specificities in varied situations. With a logical research framework and based on secondary and primary data, the main five analytical chapters of the book are devoted to the analysis of demographic, social and economic characteristics of women, status of women and the women in selected villages and urban centres in the region. The final chapter synthesizes the whole work along with an appraisal of the contemporary position of women population in the region and a few suggestions for their quality improvement.

I have great pleasure in acknowledging the help, guidance and cooperation received by me from several individuals and

institutions/organizations while carrying out the present research work. Firstly, I offer my gratitude and indebtedness to my teacher Dr. H.N. Sharma, Professor of Geography, Gauhati University for his inspiring guidance and constant supervision in every step of this work, and also for introducing the book with his foreword. I am grateful to my teachers Dr. A.K. Bhagabati and Professor M. Taher for their inspiration and valuable comments in carrying out this work. I am also thankful to Professor M.M. Das and other teachers of the Department of Geography, Gauhati University for their needful suggestions and encouragement in many occasions.

I place on record my thankfulness to the concerned officials of the Registrar General, India, New Delhi, State Census Directorates of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura, and North-Eastern Council, Shillong for having readily provided various data pertaining to my research work. I also thank the library assistants of Gauhati University, Women's Studies Research Centre, Gauhati University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, North-Eastern Council, Shillong, and Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati for their help and cooperation while consulting the library materials.

I shall remain thankful to all the respondents whom I selected for household survey for their whole hearted help and cooperation. Though it is hardly possible to mention here the names of all those individuals who have helped me in smooth conduct of my field work in different parts of the North-East, I remember with appreciation the select group of students of geography of Gauhati University, Manipur University, Kohima Science College, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, St. Mary's College, Shillong and U.C.C. College, Barapani. However, my special thanks are due to Shri Azmal Choudhury, an ex-student of Geography Department, Gauhati University for his assistance in field survey and cartographic works.

I shall fail in my duty if I do not acknowledge the authors and researchers whose valuable contributions as referred in my work have immensely helped me in formulation and analysis of the problem under study in a proper perspective.

I am delighted to express my sincere gratitude to my parents and parent in-laws for their encouragement and

goodwill towards successful completion of my work. I find no appropriate words to express my warm appreciation to my wife Madhushree who always stood behind me as the source of immense strength and inspiration for timely completion of the work.

Last but not the least, I extend my thanks to Mr. Arun Kumar Verma of Regency Publications, New Delhi for shouldering the responsibility of bringing out the book in excellent form within a short span of time.

At the end, I shall feel delighted if I learn that the book is useful to at least a few readers. I sincerely look forward to constructive criticisms and suggestions from the learned readers for necessary improvement in its future edition.

27th July, 2002,  
Guwahati

**Bimal Kumar Kar**



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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

### **Women Population and North East India: An Introduction**

The females which constitute about half of the total human population play a vital role in socio-economic functioning of the society. As a matter of fact, since the inception of human civilization, women have been an integral part of nature, society and culture. This is true irrespective of a society being traditional, transitional or a modern one (Singh *et al.*, 1988). But in reality, the female section does not get due attention while chalking out developmental plans and programmes. The contribution of women in such propositions is highly marginalised and their role pauperised. They are often underestimated, less cared for and discriminated against in one or the other form. Consequent upon such a situation, various women organisations have emerged in almost all the countries of the developing and developed world with a common objective of attaining equal share and right by women in the society. Side by side, several women research centres have also come up with a view to study various problems faced by the womenfolk, which are presently known as feministic research. In Geography this type of study is now popularly labelled as 'Geography and Gender'.

The women in India often face diverse nature of socio-cultural and economic problems. These problems range from low level of socio-economic development to prevalence of acute gender inequities. The women in the country are not only socially at a lower level compared to their men counterpart, but

economically also they are less mobile and in most cases deprived. The sex disparities in literacy and educational level (male literacy: 64.13 percent; female literacy: 39.29 percent) and work participation in non-agricultural sector (male: 36.62 percent; female: 18.91 percent) testify to the prevalence of this phenomenon.

The situation in the country's north-east which is popularly known as the 'Land of Seven Sisters' comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura is also no less true. The North East India has a distinct and well recognised entity because of its unique physical, racial and socio-cultural diversities quite different from the rest of the country. Being influenced by these diversities, the North East India witnesses a great variation in socio-economic conditions of women. Although a considerable effort has been made from time to time in the country to improve the socio-economic well-being of women, it is still a long way to go towards achieving the desired goals. The situation is no less different in the case of the country's north-east. Even after fifty five years of Independence, in the region, like many parts of the country, more than 50 percent of the females are still illiterate, every tenth female child dies before attaining the age of 2 years, about one-third of females get married before attaining the age of 18 years, and crude birth rate continues to be as high as 30 per thousand and above. As regards work participation rate also, only about one-sixth of the women are treated as main workers by the Indian Census and about half of the women main workers are engaged as agricultural labourers, although the situation in the hill areas is somewhat different. The imbalance in sex ratio in favour of men as prevalent in most parts of the country is another demographic-social problem in the region. It is, however, worth noting that the above attributes along with many others vary significantly both spatially and socially with consequent unevenness in the socio-economic well-being of women in the region.

Apart from the above, it is significant to note that in most societies of our country, many vital activities of women such as child bearing and caring, food preparation, family management, fuel and water carrying, animal rearing and a host of other activities in the house and agricultural field are

not duly accounted for. It is especially more meaningful in the context of rural areas where women constitute a substantive proportion of work force either in the formal or in the informal sectors. The position of women in the above context in the North-East is no less different from the rest of the country.

It is in the above perspectives, the present research on *Women Population of North East India: A Study in Gender Geography* is taken up to investigate various demographic and socio-economic aspects of women in the region and to find out their position in socio-economic terms. This study is considered to be significant in a number of ways. As already mentioned, women which constitute about half of the human population form an integral part of the society and play a vital role in the overall developmental processes. In recognition to this, the study of the female section of population encompassing its various attributes is highly essential to understand the overall demographic and socio-economic characteristics of any region. The logical evaluation of these attributes could very well reflect the socio-economic status of women and men in the society. As indicated earlier, the female section of population in the North-East, as elsewhere in the country, is lagging much behind its male counterparts both in social and economic terms. However, the diverse nature of physical and socio-cultural base of the study region has made the situation more complex and varied. All these call for a proper assessment of the problem in geographical perspective.

Generally speaking, research works on women in North East India are highly limited. Whatever is available is of piecemeal nature, and that too mostly from sociological perspective. Such studies hardly focus on the spatial dimension of the problem. Therefore, the present study which attempts to focus the various attributes of women's socio-economic status, its spatial variation and associated processes involved would be of great significance in a number of ways. In fact, some of the population problems resulting from sex disparities and the growing awareness of women for achieving equal socio-economic status could be resolved in the light of the findings of the study. In addition, the study would be highly meaningful and helpful to the planners and administrators who are involved in the formulation of development plans and



programmes for human development of the region and its constituent parts. The study is thus expected to have both academic and utilitarian values.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the spatial pattern of demographic, social and economic characteristics of women in the region, such as sex ratio, fertility and mortality, age at marriage, literacy and educational level and their sex disparities, the nature and degree of female participation in the agricultural as well as non-agricultural activities and their gender differentials;
2. to integrate the demographic, social and economic characteristics towards deriving the position of women in the study region and to analyse the disparities in socio-economic status of women in its various parts;
3. to investigate the patterns of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of women at the local level based on primary data for having an insightful understanding of the position of women in various socio-economic and cultural situations;
4. to explore additionally the causes and processes associated with the emerging variation in the socio-economic status of women in the region in the course of treatment of the above objectives; and
5. to suggest certain measures for socio-economic upliftment of the female section of population on the basis of findings of the study.

### **Data Base and Methodology**

Necessary secondary data for the present study covering the study region are taken from the different Census of India volumes and other relevant government publications of the Directorates of Economics and Statistics, North Eastern Council, etc. for the periods 1951–1991 in general and 1971–1991 in particular. But non-availability of Census data of Assam

for the year 1981 (the census could not be held in Assam in 1981 due to disturbed condition) has been a major constraint for the present study. Further, the changes made in the definitions of workers, literates and literacy rates by the Census of India from time to time have made their comparison difficult. However, such data are used with careful consideration of their quality and content. For other base materials, relevant literature and various reports have been consulted.

As the study region, the North East India, is considerably large, the administrative districts (numbering 60 as per the 1991 Census) are considered as the suitable spatial units of investigation for the present study. However, changes in the administrative boundaries of the districts from time to time have constrained the comparative study of the spatio-temporal patterns, although these have not affected the general result. Again, due to non-availability of certain data at district level, the analysis in such cases has been made only at the state level.

In the second stage, in order to check the validity of the findings derived on the basis of secondary data and to examine the location-specific factors behind the occurrence of various patterns, necessary primary data are collected through sample survey in the field with the help of a suitable questionnaire prepared for the purpose. As many as 12 villages and 6 urban centres of varied ecological and population characters are selected purposively to study the socio-economic characteristics of women population in them towards this objective.

The data so obtained are processed and analysed with the help of suitable and meaningful quantitative techniques. The quantitative techniques adopted in the analysis are simple ratios or percentages, Sopher's Disparity Index and certain other standard statistical measures such as measures of central tendency and dispersion, coefficient of correlation and regression, Z-scores, and Principal Component Analysis. The analysis of the problem is also supplemented by a number of maps and diagrams for giving a clear exposition of the patterns. Conclusions of the study are drawn on the bases of results derived from data analysis and personal experience gathered through the field observations at different points of time.

## Gender Studies: A Brief Perspective

### *Global Context*

Studies pertaining to women issues have assumed great importance during the last two decades throughout the world. In geography serious studies and research on specific issues concerning women have been a recent phenomenon. However, thoughts and contributory works in this field as initiated by the sociologists, economists, anthropologists and demographers have been quite significant. It is a fact that, although studies in this line in disaggregated form began from the early part of the present century, a systematic problem-oriented study and research have begun only from 1975, when the United Nations declared the period 1975–1985 as the 'International Decade of Women'. Since then the study and research oriented towards various issues and problems concerning women have come to be known as 'feministic research'. At present it has become one of the central themes of study in social sciences.

It is important to note that the feministic research in geography is still in its infancy. Practical thinking towards this kind of study in Human Geography or Social Geography was initiated in England. This too was basically the outcome of the impact of UNs 'International Decade of Women'. However, research works on women gained ground when the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) formally constituted the 'Women and Geography Study Group' in 1982. As a pioneering contribution, with great effort, this group brought out the first introductory text-book on feministic geography entitled *Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography* in 1984. Since then such kind of geographic study which emerged as a distinct branch of Human Geography has been popularly known as 'Gender Geography' or 'Geography and Gender'. The above mentioned book which attempts to establish the theoretical base of 'Gender Geography' focusing its nature and approaches tries to clarify the term 'gender', "to refer to socially created distinctions between femininity and masculinity, while the term 'sex' is used to refer to biological differences between men and women. Hence, we are concerned to introduce the idea of feminist geography—a geography which

explicitly takes into account the socially created gender structure of society, and in which a commitment both towards the alleviation of gender inequality in the short term and its removal through social change towards real equality in the longer term, is expressed" (Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG, 1984). Another pioneering work that appeared under the auspices of the Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG in the form of a book entitled *Geography of Gender in the Third World* (Momsen and Townsend, 1987) was the result of a collective effort. Apart from the most elaborate introduction about the geography of gender in developing market economies by the editors, the book also contains as many as 19 research papers dealing with the women of the third world nations. The *Human Development Report* 1995 as published by the UNDP with the theme 'Gender and Human Development' has further strengthened the field of feministic study in the world. 'Human Development, if not engendered, is endangered' is the simple but far reaching message of this Report.

Truly speaking, 'Status of Women' is a complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional concept. It is defined in a number of ways (see chapter 6 for details). Determination of women's status is even another vital issue. Unfortunately, the status of women in most societies is still identified with motherhood, and the role of women is portrayed as that of only child-bearing and child-rearing in spite of their direct and indirect contributions to the economy (Rashid, 1994). In three separate papers published in the *Professional Geographer*, while one strongly argued for the study of the gender issues in geography (Monk and Hanson, 1982), other two attempted to determine the socio-economic status of women to show the regional variation of the patterns in the world and the United States respectively by using meaningful indicators (Andrews, 1982; Lee and Schultz, 1982). These are essentially conceptual and methodological contributions towards understanding the status of women both in absolute and relative terms.

### *Indian Context*

It is true that works on gender and geography in India are still quite limited. In fact, feministic research in India in geography

under distinct branch called 'gender geography' has been started only in the early nineties. However, significant contributions encompassing varied aspects of women have been made in India by a group of educationists, sociologists, economists, and anthropologists, most of whom are women, since the beginning of the eighties. Among them the studies made by Khan and Ayesha (1982), Usha Rao (1985), Desai and Krishnaraj (1987), Banerjee (1985), Dube *et al.* (1986), Mahila Vikas Sangh (1988), Karkal and Pandey (1989), Arputhamurthy (1990), and Singh *et al.* (1988) may be considered worth mentioning. In the edited book by Dube *et al.*, which contains a good number of significant works ranging over a wide spectrum in terms of themes, geographical regions, and cultural and structural specificities, the following editorial statement bears immense significance:

"Incomplete and one-sided understanding is distorted understanding. By ignoring women as social actors who contribute to continuity and change in society, the social sciences have seriously impaired their understanding of the total social reality".

In yet another edited work of Singh *et al.*, a group of renowned anthropologists of India has made a loudable attempt to assess the status of tribal women and its correlation with development across different parts of the country. In a study on challenges of Development and Tribal Women of India Roy Burman (1988) states that, in the context of India's plural social structure, the tribal women are not passive stumps of history and they never were.

However, another latest but most outstanding work undertaken by Mahadevan (1989) has to a large extent strengthened the foundation of women research in India. The book edited by him entitled *Women and Population Dynamics: Perspectives from Asian Countries* not only contains works of different scholars from diverse fields of studies representing different parts of India but also incorporates some valuable works from some other Asian countries. As a matter of fact, the effort made by Mahadevan towards having a comparative view of the contemporary problems of women in different countries of Asia has been quite significant.

As compared to the above, a very few works that too of piece-meal nature have so far been undertaken by the geographers in India in this regard. In two different works Raju and Kumar (1989) and Kumar (1994) attempted to focus the gender issues in geography and its approaches both in national and international perspectives. In two other works made in the late sixties and early seventies by Mehta (1967) and Gosal (1973) regarding the spatial pattern of occupational structure of female workers in India and progress of female literacy in India respectively have proved that there was contribution of early geographers towards understanding the women's problems. The contributions made in recent time by Ahmad (1993), Bhagat (1993), Raju (1993) and Kumar (1993) are worth mentioning in this regard. Ahmad in her micro-level study tried to examine the relationship between the process of economic development and absorption of Muslim women in different sectors of economy in the selected villages and cities of Northern India. Kumar in his methodological study attempted to identify the regional pattern of the status of women in India for the selected indicators by using Z-score method. However, the attempt made by Alexander and Jayaraman (1977) towards explaining the qualitative methods of women's status measurement—both absolute and relative—and its change as a result of urbanisation and industrialisation in India is also no less important. Nuna (1990) made a significant contribution in the form of an Atlas entitled *Women and Development* where he tried to depict the pattern of social well-being of Indian women in regional perspective by applying sophisticated statistical methods. In a research work Nayak (1991) interestingly analysed the participation of rural women in economic activities in selected areas of India. In this study he tried to explain the nature and extent of female work participation both in spatial and cross-cultural terms. Nangia (1997), in a study on 'Population-Development Nexus', rightly emphasised the positive role of women in environment friendly development.

### *Regional Context*

In North East India also studies on gender geography are still in an embryonic stage. However, some meso level works on

socio-political role of women and socio-economic status of women in North East India, especially Assam, carried out by researchers like Das (1979), Saikia (1987), Kakati (1990), Rahman (1991), Barthakur (1993), Baruah (1993) and Kalita (1994) are worth mentioning. But as mentioned earlier, most of these works are based on descriptive analysis of the problems of women in historical and sociological perspective. A very few works contain empirical data. Again all these studies lack spatial perspective in the analyses. In Assam, Sharma's contributions (1985, 1992, 1993) to establish the foundation of gender-related research in geography since the mid-eighties have been quite significant. Considering literacy and educational levels being the vital dimensions of social development of women, he made three valuable works at meso level to examine the spatial pattern of literacy and education of women and its associated correlates in North East India. Anichary (1989) and Bora (1990) have also touched upon the socio-economic conditions of tribal women in their studies on 'Social Geography of Nagaland' and 'Population of Siang Region of Arunachal Pradesh' respectively. The author of the present work in association with Sharma (1994) analysed the spatial pattern of women literacy in Assam and tried to identify the educationally depressed zones in the state. In another work they tried to identify the sex disparity in non-agricultural activities in North East India (Kar and Sharma, 1998).

Thus, the foregoing review of available literature apparently reflects that works on socio-economic aspects of women population covering the entire North-East are still extremely limited. Whatever is found at the individual state or district level so far, comprises the works primarily done from the historical and sociological perspectives. Moreover, no comprehensive work has so far been done to find out the position of women in any part of the region both in the spatial and social terms. Thus, the present work on the socio-economic characteristics of women population in the North East India encompassing the above aspects from gender geography perspective would certainly bear immense significance.

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