

A Study on Women in Higher Educational Programme of Open University in BTAD with special reference to KKHSOU

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Abstract

In a country like India, gender equity in education has been an issue of concern since the time of independence and there has always been a thrust on education of girls to bridge the gender gap in education in India. Despite tremendous success, gender disparity in access and retention still exists in many of its states. Assam is among the Indian states that have recorded reduced gender gaps in primary and secondary education, but the aforementioned disparities still exist in higher education. One of the major challenges faced in Assam is that, few numbers of colleges are available, especially in rural setup, where students have to travel long distances to access education. It has affected girls more than boys, as most parents prefer to keep their girls at home. The Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) region, carved out from eight districts of Assam, is an educationally backward region. The aim of this paper is to study the female participation in higher education and the background of the women who were pursuing higher education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). First, the paper analyzes the trend and pattern of female enrolment in BA and MA Programme in Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) operating in BTAD between 2012 and 2016. Secondly, the paper also tries to study the background of those learners participating in higher education through KKHSOU. The analysis revealed that ODL has been bringing tremendous hope for the female aspirants of higher education.

Key words: BTAD, female enrolment, open university

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1.0 Introduction

Female education in India is still much lower than that of men in most of the states of India, and many do not receive the type and level of education that will help them to develop and utilize their skills fully. At present only about 65.46 per cent of females are literate, against the 82.14 per cent of the males (Census of India, 2011) in India. On the other hand, male literacy rate is 78.81 per cent and female literacy rate is 67.27 per cent. Again, the female enrolment in primary level is around 49 per cent, around 45 per cent in mid level and for higher secondary and junior college it is around 38 per cent (Government of Assam, 2014). Assam, among the Indian states, has recorded reduced gender gaps in primary and secondary education, but disparities still exist in higher education. There may be many reasons for these differences. For example unawareness of the people about the importance of female education, inequality of the status of male and female in the society and outlook of parents towards female education, non-availability of higher education institutions for female, low economic status of parents, burden of household responsibilities on females etc. Saikia (2013), in a study, suggests that one of the major challenges faced in Assam, is the shortage of numbers of colleges, especially in rural setup, where students have to travel long distances to access education. This has affected girls more than that of boys as most of the parents always preferred to keep their girls at home. In recent years, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University has provided educational opportunities to the learners at a successful rate. The study has been conducted to understand the rate of participation of women in B.A. and M.A. Programmes offered by Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) in four districts of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD).

2.0 Literature Review

In the field of education, a large number of studies have been conducted to examine various issues of female education in Open and Distance Learning systems. Taj (2005), in her book titled 'Current Challenges in Education', concluded that the inflexible formal educational system could not reach all the sections of the society. The formal education system by itself, cannot truly correct social disparities nor can it provide equitable opportunities for all.. Again, Saikia (2009) conducted a study on 'The Role of ODL in Assam State, India'. The study was an attempt to find out how distance education in Assam is providing opportunities to the learners to build their future. The focus has been laid down on Institute of Distance and Open Learning

(IDOL) Gauhati University. Malik and Courtney (2011) conducted a study on Higher Education and women's empowerment, how higher education offer empowerment to women and make them economically independent. In a study, Talukdar (2012) found that, the Bodo community especially those who live in rural area, would develop properly only when the women empowerment will be realized in its appropriate sense. For this, proper education facilities need to be provided in the rural area of BTAD. Also, Saikia (2013) conducted a study on 'Challenges of Higher Education in Assam for Development of Human Resources', that revealed that institutions of higher education in Assam, with crying needs for basic amenities and infrastructure, are hardly ready for this global competition. The study by Mahanta & Nayak (2013) on 'Gender Disparity and Women Empowerment in Assam' is an attempt to analyze the status of women vis-à-vis men. The study has used the indicators such as, access to education, employment, household decision-making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, exposure to media, political participation, experience of domestic violence etc in Assam. It reveals that development process in the state is not gender neutral; women face an inferior status as compared to the average women in India. Percentage of women in the government services and their political participation is quite low and does not show any sign of significant improvement. Sex ratio, though not in favor of women, is improving over time. However, various studies are conducted on ODL and on female education in Assam but very few have been done on linking them together. Regarding the BTAD area, there are no studies conducted on such issues. Therefore, the present study has been conducted to assess the rate of participation of the female aspirants of higher education through distance mode with special reference to KKHSOU in BTAD area.

3.0 Educational Status of Bodoland

Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) was created on 10 February 2003 as result of an agreement between the Government of India, Government of Assam and the leaders of the Bodo movement. The region was carved out of eight districts of Assam namely Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Borpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, and Sonitpur. Of the total population in Bodoland, Bodos form around 32 per cent, 19 per cent is Bengali-speaking Muslims, 17 per cent are Adivasis, 16 per cent is Koch Rajbangsi. Other communities including Bengali Hindu, Nepalese, Assamese, Sarania Kacharis, and Rabha form 16 per cent of the total population of Bodoland (Government of Assam, 2010). The total literacy rate in BTAD is 67.12 as

per 2011 census out of which male and female literacy rate is 74.28 and 59.70 respectively.

Table 1 Female Enrolment in High and Higher Secondary (regular mode) in BTAD in 2014-15

District	Female Enrolment in High School	Female Enrolment in Higher Secondary/Junior College
Baksa	18,127	3,662
Kokrajhar	14,111	4,166
Udalguri	7,686	6,220
Chirang	7,582	1,627
Total	37,506	15,675

Source: Statistical Handbook of BTC, 2014-15

The gap between female enrolments in High School and Higher Secondary level indicates that a large number of female students in BTAD area discontinue their studies after high school level. It is obvious from the above tables that conditions of higher education for female are discouraging in the BTAD area. The data obtained from these tables reflect the fact that women are the 'educationally disadvantaged' group of society in BTAD area.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Data sources and methodology

The study is based on secondary data obtained from official database of K.K. Handiqui State Open University head office. Secondly, interview schedules have been canvassed to a sample size of five hundred and forty three female learners of B.A. and M.A. Programme from the nine study centers of four districts of BTAD. The study is delimited to female learners of B.A. and M.A. Programme of KKHSOU only.

3.2 Sample selection

All four districts of BTAD have altogether 20 study centers of KKHSOU. Out of these study centers, only 18 study centers conduct B.A. Programme. Out of these 18 study centers, only six study centers conduct M.A. Programme. The investigator has selected nine study centers randomly for the present study.

In the present study, the total population of female learners of B.A. & M.A. Programme during the period of 2014 – 2017 is 2,173. Since the study is basically on the female learners, so out of the total female learners, 543 (25 per cent) female learners were selected randomly as a sample of female learners to be interviewed for the second objective of the present study. Out of these 543 female learners, 503 (25 per cent of 2,013) are from B.A. and 40 (25 per cent of 160) are from M.A. programme.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

Research Question 1: What is the trend of women enrolment in B.A. and M.A. programme in BTAD?

Objective 1: To analyse the trend of women enrolment in KKHSOU in B.A. and M.A. programme in BTAD.

Findings with regard to the above research question and objectives have been summarised in the following tables. Table 2 reveals that the women enrolment in B.A. Programme is increasing steadily during the period 2012 to 2015 except 2015-16.

Table 2 Year wise Women Enrolment in B.A. Programme in BTAD area during 2012-16

Area	Year wise Women Enrolment			
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
BTAD	766	789	831	527

Source: Field Survey

Table 3 indicates that except for the year 2013-14, female enrolment in M.A. is in between 40 to 50 numbers per year. It was more than 50 in the academic year 2012-13. Though the enrolment is not very high in M.A. in KKHSOU, but an average of 46 female per year in BTAD, are taking advantage of KKHSOU in pursuing their Master Degree.

Table 3 Year wise Women Enrolment in M.A. Programme in BTAD area during 2012-16

Area	Year wise Women Enrolment			
BTAD	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
	54	33	47	48

Source: Field Survey

Table 4 depicts the rate of Female Participation in B.A. programme in BTAD area during 2012-16. Though the percentage of female enrolment per year is below 50 per cent, the enrolment percentage is in between 35 to 46 per cent. The average female enrolment per year during this period is 41.35 per cent. Thus, from the data, a gender gap in enrolment has been observed.

Table 4 Percentage of Women Enrolment to Total Enrolment in B.A. Programme in BTAD under KKHSOU during 2012-16

Year of Enrolment	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Male Enrolment	889	1291	1156	789
Female Enrolment	766	789	831	512
Total Enrolment	1655	2080	1987	1301
Percentage of Women Enrolment to Total Enrolment	46.3	37.9	41.8	39.4

Source: Field Survey

From Table 5, it may be seen that the percentage of female enrolment to total enrolment is in between 36.7 per cent to 51.4 per cent. The average percentage of female enrolment per year in M.A. Programme in BTAD area during the period 2012-16 is 42.32 per cent. Thus, a gender gap in enrolment has been observed.

Table 5 Percentage of Women Enrolment to Total Enrolment in M.A. Programme in BTAD under KKHSOU during 2012-16

Year of Enrolment	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Male Enrolment	51	57	78	62
Female Enrolment	54	33	47	48
Total Enrolment	105	90	125	110
Percentage of Women Enrolment to Total Enrolment	51.4	36.7	37.6	43.6

Source: Field Survey

From Table 6, it can be observed that per cent of female enrolment to total enrolment in B.A. programme is comparatively low in Baksa district and high in Udalguri district every year. The rate of female enrolment in Chirang district is in a steady trend throughout the period 2012-13 to 2015-16. However, after 2012-13, the condition of female enrolment has been declining in all the four districts of Bodo Land.

Table 6 Year wise Percentage of Female Enrolment to Total Enrolment in B.A. Programme in four Districts of BTAD

Name of Districts	Percentage of Women Enrolment to Total Enrolment per year			
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Baksa	39.2	31.0	36.8	37.5
Chirang	47.1	42.6	45.9	47.2
Kokrajhar	47.3	40.0	42.1	40.3
Udalguri	51.9	42.0	45.6	40.3

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 shows that per cent of female enrolment to total enrolment in M.A. programme in KKHSOU is much higher than that of B.A. programme, though the total enrolment (female) in B.A. programme is much higher than that of M.A. This may reflect the fact that after completing their graduation, female, as compared to male, prefer to continue their study.

Table 7 Year wise Percentage of Female Enrolment to Total Enrolment in M.A. programme in Four Districts of BTAD

Name of Districts	Percentage of Female Enrolment to Total Enrolment in M.A. Programme			
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Baksa	53.60	34.10	53.60	46.80
Chirang	44.40	41.20	33.50	46.20
Kokrajhar	44.83	50.00	23.25	38.63
Udalguri	66.60	50.00	31.25	50.00

Source: Field Survey

Research Question 2: What are the backgrounds of the women enrolled into B.A. and M.A. Programs of KKHSOU in BTAD?

Objective 2: To study the background of the women enrolled into higher educational programs of KKHSOU in BTAD.

Findings with regard to the above research question and objectives have been summarised in the following tables.

A) General profile of the women learners

In distance education there is no age bar for the students to get admission in any of its course. The fact that has emerged from the data from the table 18 is that maximum female participating in higher educational programme belongs to the age group 20 -29. This has been observed from Table 8.

Table 8 Age Group of the Women Enrolled into B.A. and M.A. Programme

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
14 - 19	22	4.1
20 - 29	320	58.9
30 - 39	163	30.0
40 - 49	38	7.0
50 and above	0	0.0
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

From Table 9, it can be observed that majority of the respondents (84 per cent) are from the rural area. Data from table 9 reveal the fact that rural women are taking opportunities of Distance Education to fulfill their dream of higher education.

Table 9 Percentage of Female Respondents coming from Different Locality

Locality	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Urban	87	16.0
Rural	456	84.0
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

The flexibility in ODL system has been attracting many married women to join in distance education to fulfill their dream. Table 10 reveals the fact that 41.6 per cent of the female respondents are from under graduate and postgraduate programme of KKHSOU are married women.

Table 10 Marital Status of the Women Learners

Marital Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Married	226	41.6
Unmarried	307	56.5
Widow	06	1.1
Divorce	04	0.7
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

The investigator has selected five hundred and forty three female learners randomly from B.A. and M.A. Programme (503 from B.A. & 40 from M.A.) for the present study. After being interviewed 56.9 per cent of the respondents were found to be from schedule tribes and 23.2 per cent from Other Backward Class. This has been summarized in Table 11.

Table 11 Data Representing the Caste of the Respondent

Caste of the Respondent	Number of respondents	Percentage
Schedule Caste	26	4.8
Schedule Tribe	309	56.9
Other Backward Caste	126	23.2
General Caste	82	15.1
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

One of the important facts that has been emerging out from the study is that major portion of the respondents are job aspirants. 68.3 per cent of the female respondents have cited 'to be job eligible' as a reason for accessing higher education. 13.4 per cent of the respondents want promotion in the present job. This has been summarized in Table 12.

Table 12 Classification of Female Respondent according to the Reasons for accessing Higher Education

Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage
To improve Educational Qualification	39	7.2
To be Job Eligible	371	68.3
To be Eligible for Promotion / Uigher Salary in the Present Job	73	13.4
To be Eligible for Better Job	49	9.0
To acquire Knowledge to help Children in their Study	11	2.0
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

Data from Table 13 reveal the fact that majority of the respondents (28.9 per cent) left the regular mode after they dropped out at certain level of their study in regular mode. Due to poor financial condition of their parents, these dropped out students left their study so that their brother or sister can continue with their study. Again 24.9 per cent (9.8 per cent and 15.1 per cent) of the respondents said that they left their study due to early marriage, early childbirth and domestic responsibilities.

Table 13 Data representing the classification of female respondent according to the reasons for leaving regular mode

Sl. No.	Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Early Marriage and Household Responsibilities	53	9.8
2	Early Marriage and Child Birth	82	15.1
3	Drop out	98	18.1
4	Financial condition of Parents/Husband/ Guardians	61	11.2
5	So that Brother/Sister can Study	9	1.7
6	Ethnic Conflict	11	2
7	Death of any of the Parents	54	9.9
8	Parents/husbands unwillingness due to Socio-Cultural Restrictions	18	3.3
9	Sl. Nos. 3, 4 & 5	157	28.9
10	Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

According to the data in Table 14, 23.9 per cent of the respondents are homemakers and due to their family responsibility, they preferred to continue their higher study in distance mode. Again 21 per cent of the respondents joined in distance mode because either they could not get admission in the desired course in regular mode or they could not continue their study in regular mode due to different reasons. A very important fact emerging out from the study is that 86 per cent of the respondents revealed that their continuation with higher study would not have been possible if the facility of distance education was not available.

Table 14 Classification of the Female Respondents according to the reasons for Joining Open / Distance Education

Sl. No.	Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Employed	73	13.4
2	Housewife, Family Responsibility	130	23.9
3	Couldn't get Admission in Desired Course/ Continue in Regular College/University	114	21.0
4	Simultaneously Pursuing Other Courses	24	4.4
5	Parents/Husbands unwillingness to continue in regular mode	34	6.3
6	Unavailability of College near Residence	37	6.8
7	Unavailability of College near Work Place	0	0.0
8	Distance Education mode saves Time and Cost	28	5.2
9	Both 1 and 3	26	4.8
10	Both 1 and 4	21	3.9
11	All 5, 6, and 8	56	10.3
12	Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

Data shown in Table 15 indicates that main income source of maximum respondents (39.2 per cent) is trading (non-farming) or shop keeping etc. Again 32.2 per cent of the respondents family are salary dependent. From the study, it is observed that 69 per cent of the total female respondents are financially dependent on others. On the other hand, 31 per cent of the respondents are also earning members of the family.

Table 15 Classification of the Female Respondents according to the main Income Source of the Family

Sl. No.	Income Source	Number of Family	Percentage
1	Salary (Govt./private)	175	32.2
2	Wage (manual casual labor, agriculture labour)	87	16.1
3	Cultivation	42	7.7
4	Animal husbandry	2	0.4
5	Trading (non farming)/shop keeping	213	39.2
6	Rental income	0	0
7	Assistance from relatives	0	0
8	Other (Contractor, lawyer etc.)	24	4.4
9	Total	543	100

Source: Field Survey

Data in Table 16 shows that out of the total 543 female respondents, number of employed women is 120, of which some are permanent employees and some, working on a temporary basis. Govt. Employee include ‘TET Teacher’ working in LP, ME or in High school, police, post office employee etc. Almost 69 per cent of the respondents are unemployed, of which 29 per cent are found to be homemakers.

Table 16 Data representing the Employment Status of the Respondents

Employment Status	Sector	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Employed	Govt.	54	10
	Private	66	12
Unemployed	Unmarried	216	40
	Housewife	158	29
Self employed		49	9
Total		543	100

Source: Field Survey

B) Family/housing and infrastructure

From Table 17, we observe that maximum respondents (54.3 per cent) have 5 to 6 family members and only 10.5 per cent have families with members more than 7.

Upon interviewing, it is found that out of 543 female respondents, 81 per cent lived in their own house, while only 14 per cent lived in rented houses and some

of the respondents lived with their relatives. From the study, it is also revealed that 62.8 per cent of the respondents do not have a separate room or separate space for study at home.

Table 17 Family Size of Sample Respondents

Family Size	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1-2	19	3.5
3-4	172	31.7
5-6	295	54.3
7 and above	57	10.5
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

C) Educational background of the respondents

Data shown in Table 18 reveal that 1.3 per cent of the respondents studied up to class X and 4.8 per cent of the respondents studied up to higher secondary level before joining in Distance Education. These learners successfully completed a bridge course called BPP (Bachelors Preparatory Programme) conducted by KKHSOU before joining in B.A. Programme. Another important fact coming out from the data is that at the time of enrolment majority of the respondents were Under Graduate students of Regular Mode.

Table 18 Educational Qualification of the Respondents at the Time of Enrolment in KKHSOU

Educational Qualification	Number of Respondent	Percentage
IX-th standard	4	0.7
X-th standard	7	1.3
Higher secondary student	26	4.8
Higher secondary Graduate	108	19.9
Under Graduate student	358	65.9
Graduate	32	5.9
Post Graduate student	2	0.4
Post graduate	6	1.1
Total	543	100.0

Source: Field Survey

D) Socio-cultural background of the women learners accessing higher education

The study reveals the fact that 93.2 per cent of the respondents out of total have to manage the household duties along with their study. Along with their study, the female learners have to manage different types of household chores. 42.7 per cent of them have to cook regularly for the family whereas 40.7 per cent have to help others in cooking, 33 per cent of them have to look after their domestic animals etc. This has been shown in Table 19.

Table 19 Types of Household Duties Performed by Sample Respondents

Sl. No.	Type of Household Duties	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Cook regularly for the family	232	42.7
2	Help other in cooking	221	40.7
3	Help parents/husband in paddy field	75	13.8
4	Look after domestic animals	179	33
5	Take care of elderly people	161	29.6
6	Take care of small baby	76	13.9
7	Take care of family business	23	4.2

Source: Field Survey

5.0 Major Findings

The major findings of the study include:

- (1) The study reveals that except for the academic year 2015-16, the female enrolment in B.A. programme has been steadily increasing in BTAD area.
- (2) There is a decelerating trend of female learners in MA programme as compared to BA Programme in the study area.
- (3) The results show that female enrolment in B.A. programme under KKHSOU is less than male enrolment in every district of BTAD throughout the period.
- (4) The study shows that rate of female participation is less than 50 per cent in M.A. programme in all four districts of BTAD during 2012 to 2016, but the gender gap is less as compared to B.A. programme.
- (5) The study also shows that percentage of female enrolment to total enrolment in B.A. programme as comparatively low in Baksa district and high in Udalguri district.

- (6) The study reveals that rate of female participation in B.A. is a steady trend in Chirang district throughout the period 2012-13 to 2015-16.
- (7) The study shows that majority, 56.9 per cent and 23.2 per cent of the female respondents are from 'Schedule Tribe' and 'Other Backward Caste' community respectively, which reveals that backward communities are found to be benefitted from ODL.
- (8) The study shows that majority (63 per cent) of the female respondent of the sample are of age group 20-29, which reveals that young learners are benefitted from ODL.
- (9) Distance Education has provided opportunity to rural women to complete their higher education, including those who dropped out due to early marriage.
- (10) Nearly half of the female respondents (41.6 per cent) are married, who need to fulfill their family responsibilities.
- (11) 68.3 per cent of the respondents expect to gain job eligibility from the programme.
- (12) The study shows that majority of the respondents are from large family and they have to manage household chores like cooking, taking care of domestic animals, taking care of elderly people etc, along with their study.

6.0 Suggestions

To remove the gender gap in enrolment in different educational program under the ODL mode of KKHSOU, following are some suggestions provided for consideration:

- (1) To increase the number of study centers, so that female learner can easily access the Personal Contact Programs as maximum are from lower income background.
- (2) Facilities of scholarship especially for female learners be provided so that females of lower income background can afford to continue their study; also, because females are socially disadvantaged group and many guardians of our society do not want to invest their money in their daughters' study.
- (3) There should be baby-care facilities in the study centers so that the women with a small baby can also attend classes and appear in the examinations without disturbing other family members.
- (4) There should be arrangements of separate toilette for females, as many travel long distances to attend classes (maximum of them are from rural area)

- (5) There should be placement cells in every study center as the reason for joining ODL, for maximum female learners, is to be job eligible.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper has provided a background on female enrolment in two higher educational programs offered under KKHSOU in BTAD area as well as the role of ODL in education. The current gender disparity issues and the role that ODL can play in addressing these issues can be well understood from the analysis. This paper advocates increasing the facilities of ODL system to make it more gender friendly and to study the constraints the women are facing in this system, and bridge the gender gap at all level of enrolments.

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