

Status of Women in Assam During the Colonial Period

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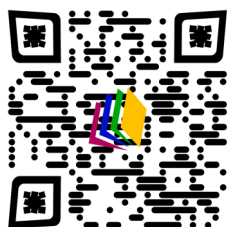
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ABSTRACT:

The coming of the British in the mainstream politics of Assam had influence the status of women and the society as a whole. In the medieval period, though the society was patriarchal in character but due to the prevalence of tribal outlook, women enjoyed certain amount of freedom in the society. Despite the fact of having better status in the society as compared to other parts of India, their position was still subordinate and therefore they were severely discriminated in various fields. However, after the colonial intervention and the advent of western education, the scenario of Assamese society witnessed lot of changes. The educational experiment of the late 19th century produced a new class of women as well as men intelligentsia who helped in the development of the status of women in the society. Women, along with male intelligentsia protested against the prevailing evil condition in the society such as female infanticide, child marriage etc. The British penetration in Assam and the introduction of western culture created a new condition and thus towards the end of 19th century many women began to participate in public domain and nationalist campaign which provided them a political status in the society.

KEY WORDS: Women History, Colonization, Assamese History, Gender Discrimination, British.

Introduction

A status is a social or professional position in the society which is either ascribed or achieved. Ascribed status is acquired by birth, whereas achieved status is that which is earned on the basis of merit. The status of women is often determined in terms of her role and social position in the society. In a vast and complex country like India, the status of women is not uniform and has undergone several changes within the course of time due to its social and economic needs. Assam as one of the states of North-eastern India has certain regional peculiarities then compared to other parts of India. On the population front, it is inhabited by different groups of people having different culture, food habit and languages. Though the region is basically patriarchal in character, but the women possessed certain amount of liberty from the very ancient time due to the assimilation of various tribal socio-economic and religious norms and values. Throughout the ages women played a very important role in the Assamese society but their contributions were mostly ignored and they were always regarded as the inferior sex. However, the intrusion of British rule in the society of Assam brought major changes in the status of women. There were

considerable level of growth and development in the condition of women and have made remarkable progress in certain aspects of socio-economic fields.

Objective

The main objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To study the condition of women in the pre-colonial Assam.
2. To study the changes in the status of women after the colonial intervention in Assam.

Methodology

The proposed work will use the methodology of historical analysis. The sources for writing this paper have been collected from different books and articles related to the subject.

Discussion

In order to understand the role of women in the traditional society of Assam, it is necessary to discuss the socio-cultural changes of the society in the course of time. The picture of the socio-political status of women in different period of history could be derived from the literatures and historical accounts. In the Brahmins, Puranas, Smritis and other ancient and early medieval accounts the position of women is largely portrayed in a low civic status. In Katha-Guru-Charita, women were depicted as unfaithful and disloyal to their husbands and jeopardise the position of a man in the society (Baruah:1992; 10). Ram Charan Thakur in his Guru Charit asserts that women are most irreligious and sinful (Duttabaruah: 1955;56). Even Sankardeva who is comparatively liberal in his attitude towards women, states that women are full of illusion and mesmerism (Barman: 1986;105).

From the very ancient time, caste system did not take a rigid form in the society of Assam and women enjoyed certain amount of freedom, despite of that they were still considered as secondary sex. Among the higher caste women, the widowed were expected to live a severe life. Though widow re-marriage was prevalent among the lower section of the society but they were never given the equal respect and status as before. The practise of Sati and dowry was not

known in the Assamese society.

Customs of child marriage was practised among the upper-caste Assamese Hindus such as Brahmins and Kayasthas. Though the girls were married in the very early age but they were sent to their in-laws house after attaining puberty. It is not clearly known as to when the child marriage came into existence in Assamese society but the worst consequence of this custom was that due to untimely marriage at a very young age and lack of proper education they were totally subjugated by the male members and were not allowed to participate in any decision making process including the marriage of their own daughters. Whereas, in the lower section of the society child marriage was absent. In medieval Assamese society, Purdah system was unknown in both the tribal and non-tribal society. The Assamese women were free to move and take equal share in the agricultural works with the men folk without covering their faces.

In the pre-colonial medieval Assam, women of both upper and lower caste were neglected from perusing formal education, as it was believed that imparting education to women would destroy the purity of women (Lalnehzovi; 2009: 21). In a series of articles published in the Assam Bandhu, the exposure of women to formal western education was considered as a threat to the position of man (Phukon: 2009; 21). The advent of the British in the 19th century affected the status of women in both social and economic fields. With the spread of Western education in the society of Assam the people came with the contact of nationalist and liberal ideas of the west. In this situation, the young youth received higher education in English and engaged themselves in different professions. They came up with new ideas in the intellectual and social field which were designed by western ideologies and conscience. They advocated women education and protested against the evil practices that were prevalent in Assam at that time. This was the beginning of the emergence of new intelligentsia in Assamese society. The people like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Gunbhiram Barua, Hemchandra Gowswami, Chandrakanta Agarwala, Haliram Dekial Phukan, Anandaram Dekial Phukan played a significant role in the process of bringing consciousness about women's question in Assam. The first group of educated women came

from the families of this intelligentsia. They supported the initiatives taken up by the British to spread the western education. The missionaries were the pioneers for the development of women education in Assam. They were interested in female education and believed that women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent. They established several schools for the girls to provide education.

The outcome of such initiatives by the missionaries resulted in the establishment of number of schools, such as by 1837, Mrs Cutter had a girl school in operation at Sadiya. This was followed by the establishment of another school at Shivasagar in 1840 (Goswami; 2012: 69). The missionaries provided a minimum education to girls where they were taught general subjects like reading and writing, geography, history simple arithmetic etc. Besides this, they also taught lesson on sewing, knitting, crochet, embroidery and handicraft. This formal education led the women to come out from the fore fold of the house and take a part in public sphere. They found a voice and wrote about their lives and condition of the women. In this context, women like Tarini Dev, Vishnuprava Devi Baruah, Dharmeswari Devi Baruah, Nalinibala Devi played a significant role. Tarini Devi along with Holi Ram Dhekiyal Phukan tried to work towards women education. She wrote a book with title 'Jokhola Bondho Satragit' which speaks about the spiritual development of human beings. Vishnuprava Devi and Swarnalata Devi fought against the evil practises in the society and stand against the social injustice towards the widow. Chandraprava Saikiani worked in a remote village at Tejpur as a teacher and tried to fight against the social evils such as child marriage, social hierocracy and boldly deal with the issues of sexual exploitation of widows and prostitution. She also played a significant role in organizing the women of the remote villages. All these women belonged to the upper section of the society who tried to bring some significant changes in the status of women with the help of western education.

The middle class new intelligentsia not only promoted women's education but also supported widow remarriage and protested against the child marriage and polygamy. Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Barua, Lakshminath Bezbarua advocated widow remarriage and women's education

through their writings. Gunabhiram Barua married Bishnupriya who was the widow of Parsu Barua, a friend of Anandaram Dekial Phukan. He also gave his daughter, Swarnalata Barua, in marriage for second time after the death of her husband. He supported and popularised the widow remarriage by marrying a widow. Hemchandra Barua refused to marry for the second time after the death of his wife in the protest of polygamy. All these works encouraged the new generation to work for the emancipation of women.

During pre-colonial period Purdah was not known to Assamese society. But, after the coming of the British, they brought the Bengali clerks into the administration of Assam. This became the reason for the penetration for some non-Assamese culture in Assamese society such as the upper class women started to cover their face with veil or Orani. Sometimes, they had to cover their face with a Japiso that no one can see them. In terms of economy, the women of Assamese society played a significant role. Traditionally women were fine weavers. They took active part in agricultural activities with man especially the women of lower section of the society. Though they played an important role and helped their men in agricultural activities but they were not given the equal status and share of income as the man. During the period of struggle for independence the weaving talent of the Assamese women got political importance due to the non violent programme of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi visited Assam in 1921 and in his lecture he inspired the women of Assam who were good weavers and spinners to take part in the freedom struggle by boycotting foreign cloths and weaving khadi cloths for the indigenious people. This impression of Gandhi towards the womenfolk of Assamese society gave them enough self confidence to develop their status and take active part in the freedom struggle.

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the women of Assamese society began to participate in public domain and nationalist movement. In the first half of the 20th century, within the nationalist movement, there developed few women organisation like Dibrugarh Mahila Samity, Nowgong Mahila Samity and Tejpur Mahila Samity. These organisations mainly worked for the

upliftment of women and took up issues regarding the status of women. Besides this, women also got opportunities to express their opinions through Asom Sahitya Sabha and Asom Chatra Sanmilian. Thus by this time, women gradually stepped out from the confinement of their houses and participated in the nationalist movement actively

During freedom struggle women took active part as well as the male people. Due to the spread of western education some strong women leaders like Chandraprava Saikiani, Pushpalata Das, Amalprava Das came up who played an important role in the development of women's education and status (Barua: 2007: 359). They inspired the general Assamese women to protest against the oppression and work for their own interest. They became the example for other women who were trapped within the four walls of their houses. Under their leadership the Assamese women make their important contribution in the freedom struggle both in constructive and revolutionary works. They promoted the Khadi Gramodyog and also became the martyr in the freedom struggle.

Conclusion

The British brought with them new ideas and views which initiated some basic changes in the socio-economic and political structure of the Assamese society. The collective impact of the new administrative system and the influx of western ideas created an atmosphere which resulted in a new awakening among the women in the society. The western thoughts and ideas gave the women folk a voice which helped them to develop their status and associated them with the mainstream politics. In nineteenth century the political situation gave them a platform to secure their position in the freedom struggle which brought consciousness about the rights and status of Assamese Women.

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