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WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY OF ASSAM

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Abstract

The historical writings of Indian society are mostly dominated by the history of males and dealt little with the history of women. The voices of the women are not represented in the historical reconstruction. The conventional history marginalized everyday lives of women into irrelevance and virtual non-existence. It is therefore very necessary that these voices needs to be heard in order to get a proper understanding of gender sensitized past. In this particular context, majority of the literature on the medieval history of Assam dealt with the political history of the time and primarily focussed on the historical events related to the kings and their battles. The information regarding women was fragmented and not able to give us a proper understanding of the past. Therefore, in this particular paper an attempt has been made to bring out the history of Assamese women and their position in the medieval society of India, particularly Assam.

Keywords: Assam, gender, medieval, women, history.

Introduction

Women's history is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women. Like men, women are and always have been actors and agents in history. They have been the central, not marginal, to the making of the society and to the building of civilisation.ⁱ However, their history often tended to focussed on the 'status of women', which in turned has led to a concentration of attention on a limited set of equations such as marriage law, property rights etc. normally viewed as indices of status.ⁱⁱ This limited focus has left a major lacuna in our understanding of the gender relations. Therefore, the centre of attention must be moved away from question of 'status' of high and low, and to look into the structural framework of gender relations, i.e. to the nature and basis of the subordination of women and its extent and specific form in Indian society.ⁱⁱⁱ

The subordination of women is a common feature in almost all stages of history and it is prevalent in large parts of the world but the extent and form of that sub-ordination has been conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which women have been placed.^{iv} In this context, the history of the women of Assam requires a special attention. Along with the other parts of India, the Assamese society was also patriarchal in nature^v and as such was guided, in general, by the codes of *Manu Samhita*. However, the freedom of the women in the tribal societies of Assam cannot be withdrawn completely from them.

Research Methodology

The research carries archival data including the secondary sources as well. Historians had to rely on different sources to construct the history of Assam. There are references about the Assam region that were found in Sanskrit and Buddhist literature and accounts of foreign travellers. The primary sources mainly consist of the Assamese chronicles, which are popularly called as *Buranjis* and the medieval literary works of Sankaradeva and the writings of other Vaishnavite preceptors. This research also considers oral literature in the form of proverbs.

Women and Economy

The social position of a person depends on the degree of economic influence he or she wields over society^{vi}. Assamese society from the ancient times was based on primitive agriculture and as such women received an equal or higher status compared to the men because production through hoe culture depends basically on the labour of woman^{vii}.



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However, gradually with the emergence of advanced mode of production with the use of cattle drawn plough, the society moved from a primitive to a feudal structure and along with that, women become subservient to man and they were undervalued as ploughing in extensive wet areas required the labour work of a man. The culture of plough cultivation was brought by the Ahoms, a Shan branch of Tai or Thai family of South-East Asia^{viii} in the thirteenth century of medieval Assam.

Women played an indispensable role in demonstrating economy by actively participating in stages of cultivation except ploughing.^{ix} The cultivation of cereals, vegetables, fruits, tobacco, and sugarcane were done by the women. Along with it, all the household duties like taking care of their children and attending upon their husband and all the senior members in the family were carried by women. Moreover, an Assamese woman wove all the cloths needed for the whole family, spinning thread from cotton or silk-worm. Women from all section of the society from queen downwards to the peasants were proficient in spinning and weaving.^x It was for such roles of women in the family that male domination could not go to the extent of reducing them to the status of mere chattels. Moreover, because of the tribal base of the society, the social evils like seclusion of women, child marriage, practice of sati, ban on widow remarriage etc. could not gain ground in Assam. Although among the upper stratum of the society, there are few references of child marriage and condemnation of widow-remarriage but it had a little influence on the vast majority.^{xi}

Women and Religion

From early times, Assam was inhabited by many indigenous tribes and they had a strong belief in animism and fetishism where women played more important or equal roles with men. The cult of *Shakti* or mother goddess was the most dominant cult during the medieval Assam. Majority of the people worshipped mother goddess in different names and different forms. However, with the introduction of the neo-Vaishnavism, the worship of the mother goddess was reduced to the background which had influenced lowering the social status of women.

Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam is popularly known as *Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma*, which means 'Shelter-in-one-religion'. *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement was a pantheistic religious tradition. It was founded and propagated by Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century^{xii} Neo-Vaishnavism emphasis on the worship of only one God i.e. Lord Krishna. It stands strongly against the worship of the mother goddess and advocated for a patriarchal society. It referred women as the roots of all evils and serious obstacles towards attaining salvation and strengthened male domination in the Hindu society and inspired women to surrender their individual rights and merge their identities with men.^{xiii} Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva not only disowned Mother Goddess, but in comparison to the *bhakti* saint of other parts of the country like Chaitanya of Bengal, it provides no place to *Radha* in his writings (Barman 1999) or in his mode of worshipping lord Krishna.^{xiv}

Historian Barman consider Sankaradeva as the representative of a patriarchal society because at many times he had showed aversion to women by speaking of them in the breath with the Sudras, the Candalas, the Yanvanas and other 'detestable' people, referring to them all as sinners, debased, impure etc.^{xv} However, in practice he did not renounce family life, nor did he ask his disciples to do so. But in his writings he used to paint the fair sex as the reminder of the sensual needs of man that were considered hindrances to his spiritual attainment.^{xvi} This is reflected in many of the verses he either quoted or translated from Sanskrit, where people were often advised to refrain themselves from the pernicious influence of woman:

"Women are absolute mischiefs. Man suffers great pains in the company of women"-

(*Bhakti-ratnakara*. V.1018)

"Beautiful women are great mischiefs; there is no release from them."

(*Bhagavata*. V.10776)

The existence of *devadasi* system is another characteristic of the medieval Assamese society. The institution of *devadasi* or temple women in Assam had a remote antiquity. The *devadasis* in Assam were usually called *Natis* or temple dancer. The temples of Negheriting, Rangpur, Pari Hareswala temple of Dobi and the Haygirva Madhava temple at Hajo were associated with the devadasi institution. There were also some centres in villages where girls were imparted training in dance and music for occasionally performing in temples and royal palaces. The devadasis were expert in composition



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songs which were popularly known as *Nati Nachar Git*.^{xvii} Initially the devadasis were not looked down upon because they had to be accomplished and expert in dance and music. But in later times, they were disrespected because many of them under state patronage had to convert themselves into prostitutes.^{xviii}

Initially the temple girls led celibate lives dedicating their body and soul to the temple deity. But gradually corruption crept into the institution and it got converted into a sort of temple prostitution. As a result, people lost their regard to the institution. Scholars like Rajani kanta Bordoloi in his book *Rahdai Ligiri* has given a description of this moral degradation in the institutions of *devadasis* or *Natis*.^{xix} Robinson too relating to the worship of Kamakhya temple describes, in brief, performances of the female temple dancer and the degradation that has set into the practice.^{xx} It is mentioned in the Vanamala's Tezpur grant that women were gifted to the temple of Hatakeswar Siva and the same grant referred to them as *vesyas* (prostitutes).^{xxi}

Women in Regional Folk-lore

The position of women in an Assamese society can also be gleaned by looking into the Assamese proverbs especially from the aphorism of *Dak*. An Assamese husband asserted their superiority over their wives and tried to restrict the freedom of women portraying them mischievous and fickle minded.^{xxii} This is gleaned from certain proverbs taken from the manuscripts of the *Dak Vacana* (regional folklore tradition) running as follows:

“*hajaro lau dangor hok. Tothapi patar tal*”

Whatever large a gaurd be, it is always covered by leaves (guard here symbolises wife and leaves a husband)^{xxiii}

Again, “*tirimiri bhatau koa, ei chari jatir asai apao*”

-women, a middle man and a crow are not reliable. Besides, the aphorisms of *Dak* had restricted the woman's freedom of movement and encouraged early marriage and subordinate to men.^{xxiv}

One colophon from *Dak* states that the downfall of those families is sure who keep grown up girls in their homes. At another place, he discourages remarriage of a widow having a male child which is reproduced as follows-

“*Dakar bachan vedar bani, prolunga buwari gharalai nani; toku banche muku banche ,bhal bhal khini petukaloi sanche*”

-Regard the statement of *Dak* as injunctions of the Vedas, never admit a woman with a son as a wife into your house, she will deceive both you and me and reserve all that is best for her son.^{xxv}

Again,

“*Ji Nari bariya karay bat, Yuvati hai behai hat, jalake paitaleke jai, Dake bule taik nidibi thai*”

-*Dak* advises never to give shelter to that woman who allows a passage through her compound and goes to market though young and who moves about at her sweet will.^{xxvi}

In general, husbands claiming superiority over wives often treated them as slaves and did not dine together with them, thinking that if they did so, the wives would claim equal status with them. Robinson's in his writing in the early part of the 19th century made the following observation on this aspect, ‘A state of dependence more humiliating than that to which the weaker sex is here i.e. Assam subject, cannot easily be conceived. Like most women of India, they are denied even the least portion of education and are excluded from every social circle. They are even accounted unworthy to partake of religious rites except in conjunction with their husbands and hence that remarkable proof of barbarity, the wife held unworthy to eat with their husband is also prevalent. The women in fact, are in all respect held in extreme degradation.’^{xxvii}

Conclusion

Women are essential and central in creating society. It is therefore very important to bring out the history of women and their position in order to acquire a clear understanding of the past and to obtain important insights. The position of the women in the medieval society of Assam was not impressive but at the same time it was relatively better compared to the



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other parts of India. However, the introduction of female education in the mid- nineteenth century enabled them to become conscious about their rights, duties and potentialities and played a remarkable role in the freedom struggle movement of India.

End Notes

- ⁱ Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986: 4.
- ⁱⁱ Chakravarti, Uma. Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. *Economic and Political weekly* 28, no.14 (Apr 3, 1993): 579-585.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*
- ^v Baruah, S.L. Women role in Administration and Politics in Early Assam: A Political Study. *Indian Review*(2022).
- ^{vi} Barman, S. *An Unsung Colossus*. Gauhati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1999: 70-75.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*
- ^{viii} Baruah, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1986: 220.
- ^{ix} Baruah, S.L. (1986). *Op.cit.*, 422.
- ^x *Ibid.*
- ^{xi} Borah, Bibha. *Society in Medieval Assam with special reference to Women*. Shillong, 1993: Introduction.
- ^{xii} Baruah, S.L. (1986). *Op.cit.*, 447.
- ^{xiii} Borah, Bibha. (1993). *Op.cit.*
- ^{xiv} Barman. S. (1999). *Op.cit.*, 73.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 71-74.
- ^{xvii} Chaliha, P. *Asamar Nritya Kala*. Gauhati: Asam Gaurav Editorial Board, 1978: 401.
- ^{xviii} Barua. S.L. "State, Patriarchy and Women in Medieval Assam." *Proceeding of the Indian History Congress* 66. (2005-06): 264-295.
- ^{xix} Bordoloi, R.K. *Rahdai Langiri*. Gauhati, 1973: 121.
- ^{xx} Robinson, William. *A Descriptive Account of Assam*. Delhi. Sankaran Prakashan, 1975: 258.
- ^{xxi} Baruah, S.L. (1986). *Op.cit.*, 155.
- ^{xxii} Borah, Bibha. (1993). *Op.cit.*
- ^{xxiii} D, Neog. *New light on the history of Asamiya literature*. Gauhati, 1963: 79.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 77.
- ^{xxvii} Robinson, William. (1975). *Op.cit.*, 274.