



ISSN: 2249-894X  
 IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)  
 UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514  
 VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 8 | MAY - 2019



## WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN ASSAMESE PERIODICALS OF THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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### ABSTRACT:

Western education in Assam in the nineteenth century helped Assamese intellectuals in general seek enhancement of women's education, health, social position and so on. However, there were a few who opposed this. Therefore, two distinct discourses are discernible in matters relating to women in the Assamese periodicals ranging from 1846, when the first Assamese periodical Orunodoi was published. The debate went on till 1925, the year of the publication of the first Assamese women's magazine Ghar Jeuti.

The present research paper aims at an exploration of the representation of the women of Assam in selected articles of the Assamese periodicals published between 1846 and 1925. It is expected that the present paper will help one realize the position of Assamese women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the one hand and understand the ideological practices behind the related representation on the other.

**KEYWORDS:** Assamese periodicals, gender, history, oppression, representation, rights.

### INTRODUCTION

The American Baptist missionaries founded *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese newspaper, in 1846. The newspaper began a process of transformation of the Assamese society by using Western perspectives. The subsequent vernacular papers and magazines carried the process on. They tried to improve the backwardness of the Assamese people in the fields of education, health, women's social position and so on. Intellectuals like Anandaram Dekial Phukan and Hemchandra Barua focused on women

education, widow remarriage and the overall improvement of women's social position through their writings. A few other Assamese intellectuals led by Balinarayan Bora of *Mou* fame, however, opposed Assamese women's institutional education. These pro-women and anti-women intellectuals represented the female gender within the contemporary social environment in various ways. The publication of the first women's magazine *Ghar Jeuti* in 1925 in a way put an end to such a women-centric controversy with its representation of the voice of Assamese women in full form.

The Assamese periodicals from the first one titled *Orunodoi* (1846-80) to the first women's

magazine titled *Ghar Jeuti* (1925-31) focused on areas like education, health, women's issues and others. In the pre-*Ghar Jeuti* period, i.e., during 1846-1925, the women's issues addressed by the Assamese periodicals included the challenges of women education, widow remarriage and the overall improvement of women's social position. The period witnessed two distinct groups in relation to the attitudes to these issues: the first, led by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua and others, were pro-women, while the second, led by Balinarayan Bora and others, were anti-women, when considered in the light of new insights of feminism and gender. These groups of

intellectuals represented the female gender within the contemporary social environment in various ways. A proper investigation into the history of the representation is deemed to describe the position of Assamese women in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries on the one hand and bring out the ideological practices behind such representations on the other.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

In the present paper, a proper scientific research methodology will be employed. Data found from the primary and the secondary sources will be used in the 'Discussion' section of the paper. The data will be analyzed to arrive at the 'Conclusion'. In the process of arriving at the 'Conclusion', the analytical method will be primarily used, but the comparative method will also be employed when necessary.

### **SCOPE OF THE PAPER:**

The present study will involve the social aspects of the construction of the female gender in Assam of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The exact dates accepted for the present study fall in between 1846, the year in which the first Assamese periodical titled *Orunodoi* was published, and 1925, the year in which the first women's magazine titled *Ghar Jeuti* was brought out. This pre-*Ghar Jeuti* period, i.e., 1846-1925 does not allow one to go into details of *Ghar Jeuti*, which heralded another phase in the history under discussion, insofar as the attitude of Assamese intellectuals to women is concerned.

Only a few selected articles published in the Assamese periodicals of this period will be taken into account, because the space fixed for the present paper is quite short. These articles are from the *Orunodoi*, the *Assam Bilasini*, the *Mou*, the *Banhi* and the *Ghar Jeuti*. They have been deemed as representing the general attitude of the Assamese intellectuals of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in matters relating to women's issues.

### **DISCUSSION:**

The history of Assamese periodicals began with the foundation of the *Orunodoi* in 1846. The monthly, edited and published by American Baptist Missionaries till 1880, played a great role in the re-establishment of the Assamese language by replacing Bengali, the official language in Assam between 1837 and 1873. It also created an intellectual environment, in which Assamese people enlightened themselves with the modern and advance ideologies of the West, sometimes relayed via the Bengal Renaissance. Its articles, written by both the American Baptist Missionaries published in the *Orunodoi* encouraged them to become conscious of their own history and culture and to get into a scientific temper. The *Assam Bilasini* (a monthly; 1871-83) of Sridhar Barua of the Auniati Satra in Majuli, the *Assam Darpan* (a monthly; 1874-75) published from Darrang, the *Assam News* (a weekly in Assamese and English; 1882-85) of Hemchandra Barua, the *Assam Bandhu* (a monthly; 1885-86) of Gunabhiram Barua and the *Mou* (a monthly; 1886) of Balinarayan Bora carried on the process of enlightenment by various means in Assam of the *Orunodoi* era (1846-89).

The second wave of Assamese periodicals in the *Jonaki* era (1889-1938) swept over Assam with the Romantic ideals of the West. *Jonaki* (a monthly; from Calcutta during 1889-96 and from Guwahati in 1901), edited at various times by stalwarts like Chandrakumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Satyanath Bora and a few others, initiated this wave and remained the most influential periodical of the *Jonaki* era, named after the magazine. Padmanath Gohain Baruah's *Bijuli* (a monthly from Shillong; from 1902) and *Usha* (a monthly from Tezpur; from 1907), the American Baptist Missionary A. K. Garney's *Dipti* (a monthly; 1905-1907), Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Banhi* (a monthly from Calcutta; from 1909), Ambikagiri Raichoudhuri's *Chetana* (a monthly; 1919-26) and Kanakalata Chaliha and Kamalalaya Kakati's *Ghar Jeuti* (the first Assamese women's monthly from Jorhat; 1925-31) were the other leading periodicals of the era. These periodicals spread nationalist ideas by publishing various articles on historical topics and social issues. *Ghar Jeuti* had the added grandeur of dealing with issues related to women.

Going back to the early nineteenth century Assam, one sees that the wave of Bengal renaissance swept over the Assamese society and influenced the Assamese educated youth of the time to a great extent. According to Amalendu Guha, the wave of Bengal renaissance motivated them to borrow new ideas of the West in order to improve and modernize the Assamese society (Guha 1991 : 206-218). The two most important Assamese personalities in this regard were Haliram Dhekial Phukan, the father of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, and his (Haliram Dhekial Phukan's) brother Jajyaram Kharghariya Phukan. Haliram Dhekial Phukan used a pet name to write a letter to *Samachar Darpan* of Bengal to support women's education in the first half of the nineteenth century itself (Guha 1991 : 208). Jagiyaram Dhekial went to Calcutta to learn English education and became an associate of Raja Rammohan Ray in his reform movement (Barua 1971 : 18).

The representative of the next generation of theirs, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan shaped his mind the new ideas and thoughts made available to him by his learned father and uncle. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan went to Calcutta to have English education in 1841. After coming back home, he expressed 'modern' ideas in the *Orunodoi*. He took initiative in educating the Assamese women and girls. He taught his wife at his home and also gave un-institutional modern education to Padmavati, his daughter, who eventually become the well-known writer of *Sudharmar Upakhyan* (1884), an early novella in Assamese, and of *Hita Sadhika* (1885). Her writings appeared in Assamese periodicals like the *Assam Bandhu*, *Jonaki* and *Banhi*. Later, when Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam in 1921, Padmavati Devi Phukanani informed him about the social status of Assamese women (Dhekial Phukan 1999 : 16).

Hemchandra Barua followed Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's path and became a supporter of women's education in Assam. In his book "Notes on the Marriage Systems of the People of Assam", he vehemently criticized the system of "kanya-pan" ("trade or sell of daughter"), a system that existed especially in lower Assam (Choudhury 2001 : 81). He used his modern and advance ideas to mitigate the backwardness and the social taboos of the Assamese society. For this, he actively supported the idea of widow remarriage. He supported it with a firm belief that women should have equal rights as that of men. If men could re-marry after their wives' death, why should women be deprived of that right? This was his question, which reflects his modern thinking (Choudhury 2001 : 88). Apart from this, Hemchandra Barua opposed polygamy in the *Orunodoi*. His article "Anek Bia Kara Ajugut" ("Polygamy is not ethical") in *Orunodoi* under the pseudonym of Sri Sonar Chand reflects his disagreement on the existing system of polygamy (Choudhury 2001 : 89).

This article was followed by Hemchandra Barua's another article, titled "Stri-Shiksha", which appeared in *Orunodoi* in 1961. There he supported the need of education for Assamese women to make them free. He also advised that women could be good life partners for the men provided they were given sufficient education. Here, he emphasized on the mental equality of women with their male counterparts. The need of women for mental support and satisfaction was a new idea brought from the Bengal Renaissance (Choudhury, 2001 : 98). Before that, the Assamese traditional society, like any other traditional society, considered women to be mere instruments of giving birth to children and of doing only the household duties. Barua's article emphasized that education for women would reap benefit for the society: "Jetialoike tirota bilakak bidya sikai muktavastha dia nejai, tetialoike desor mangal hobor sambhavana nai" ("There is no possibility of welfare of the country, till when women are not given freedom by providing them education"; "Stree-Shiksha" in *Hemchandra Barua Rachanawali*, 1999 : 459). The article also criticized the traditional marriage system in which the interest of the bride and the bridegroom were not taken into consideration. Marriage was conducted by the family on the cost of interests of both the bride and the bridegroom. Barua advocated in the article that the interests of the bride and the bridegroom should be the prime factor in a marriage. This was clearly a proof of his liberal and highly advanced mindset. By highlighting the need of a girl's interest or disinterest in a marriage he not only questioned the traditional marriage system but also gave women an equal voice with their male counterparts.

In a letter published in the March, 1876 issue of *Assam Bilasini*, 'Desha Hitaishi Ejan Satya Bakta' or 'a well-wisher of the country' wrote against the "sowali besa pratha" ("kanya pan" or "trade or sell of daughter") being popular among the lower class people including people from the higher (such as the

Brahmin) and the lower (such as the Sudra) castes. According to the writer, who according to Jatindranath Goswami might be none other than Hemchandra Barua, the price for a bride amounted to one thousand and two hundred rupees in special cases, such as when she was from a Brahmin family. The writer then called the trade inhuman and assumed that it was so heinous that its practice would be sufficient to mark its practitioners as eligible for hell. He then appealed to the Assamese people not to practice the trade and then concluded with the hope that the British government in Assam would reform it soon (Goswami 1998 : 132-41).

Intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Hemchandra Barua constituted the pro-women group in the nineteenth century Assam. They raised their voice for the need of institutional women education in Assam. Besides this group, an anti-women group of Assamese intellectuals raised their voice against the need of women education. This group was not in favour of giving women an equal right with their male counterparts. In the monthly paper *Mou* in 1886, Balinarayan Bora wrote an article titled "Tirutar Ban Ki" ("What are women's duties?"), which was the epitome of expression of such anti-women ideas. In the article, Bora strongly demonstrated his disinterest in institutional women education. According to him women should not be given the opportunity to educate themselves with modern institutional education like the male members of society. He felt that "the Bhati Sabhyata" ("western education") gradually penetrated into Bengal and created a group of women who read only cheap novels on the subject of love fashioned after Western popular fiction. "The Bhati Sabhyata" also struck roots in Assam in a low scale. According to Bora, the only way to allot specific work structure to men and women and to prevent women from manly professions of doctors and advocates and others was to bring this "Bhati Sabhyata" under control (Bora 1980 : 2). He advocated that the household works like child birth, child pampering, discipline, hosting guest and weaving should be the prime works for the Assamese women. His logic for allotting weaving to women was that it could make Assamese women economically self-sufficient and help her family from the burden of heavy coast of foreign cloths. Again, according to him, weaving could increase patience (Bora 1980 : 3).

Balinarayan Bora, however, supported education for women, but that too within her own home. According to him, after having the basic knowledge of language and arithmetic women need not have to study. They should rather concentrate in household duties (Bora 1980 : 4). Such an attitude to women is quite unexpected on the part of Bora, who became a civil engineer in London in 1877. Still, his article has retained his goodwill for both men and women. The only astonishing element in the article was that he sacrificed women's education for the sake of restoring the set structure of the society.

Bora's stance was traditional and un-encouraging even for young enthusiasts like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, who was studying in Calcutta at that time. Later, Bezbaroa edited *Jonaki* for some time and *Banhi* for a long time. These magazines under his editorship took up a pro-women attitude in various matters like women's education, women's social position and others. "Kamaleswari Devi", Bezbaroa's article in the eleventh-twelfth issue of the seventeenth year of *Banhi*, praises an elderly woman named Kamaleswari Devi for her enthusiastic acceptance of her son's marriage with a girl already attaining puberty, a scarce happening among the Brahmins like them at that time (Bezbaroa 2005 : 2242). The article underscores Bezbaroa's stance against child marriage, which brought harm especially to the young brides. Such an attitude taken up by Bezbaroa strengthened the pro-women movement taking place since the nineteenth century and weakened the conflicting anti-women movement of the nineteenth century. This was the intellectual ground of the pre-*Ghar Jeuti* period, i.e., the period between 1846 and 1925, on which the strongly pro-women movement led by *Ghar Jeuti* is based. Write-ups like "Nari Jagaran" ("Rise of Women") and "Bibhinna Deshar Nari-Andolan" in the first issue of *Ghar Jeuti* forecast this second phase of the movement for women's rights in Assam.

## CONCLUSION:

The discussion made above shows that the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a social revolution in the field related to women's issues after the foundation of the first Assamese periodical titled *Orunodoi* in 1846. Two groups of Assamese intellectuals discussed the issues. The first of them, the dominant one led by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Hemchandra Barua, were in favour of



women's education, rights and overall improvement in social position, while the other led by Balinarayan Bora and others were opposed to such issues. However, time was favourable for a positive change in matters related to women. The turn of the new century witnessed newer modern thoughts. As a result, the pro-women movement became stronger enough to obliterate the anti-women movement, thanks to intellectuals like Lakshminath Bezbaroa. This social and intellectual environment created the basic ground for *Ghar Jeuti's* stronger pro-women movement in the latter half of the third decade of the twentieth century.

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