

The Lives in a Gendered Society: An Analytical Study on Status and Position of Women in Assam

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Abstract: The Research Article deals with the discussion on the status and position of women in Assamese society and the role played by different traditional and cultural institutions towards the projection of women. Firstly, to examine the status and position of women in Assamese society, various religious texts, cultural myths and stories and literatures of Assam have been discussed. Next, how violence against women is justified in the patriarchal social structures of Assam has been discussed.

Key words: Cultural myth, Gendered society, Patriarchy, Religious Texts, Status and Violence.

Introduction

The status and position of women in a society is judged by the life being lived by women in an environment—the environment should be worthy of to live long, healthy and creative life. It is worth mentioning that an assessment of status of women starts from the social framework, social structures, cultural norms and value system of a given society which influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine the role and position of women in the society. It also depends on how significant role women play in the **Private and Public Sphere** of society and a nation. And to trace the status and position of women in any society we have to study the social structure, cultural norms and value system as these are the important determinants which influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine the role and position of women in a particular society.

It is apparent that the status and position of women in Assamese society and culture is far and away reflection of the entire Indian society and the culture. Assessing the status and position of women in India In this regard Krishnan and Dighe, says—

“Unwelcomed at birth, yet referred to as Laksmi of the house; neglected in the childhood, yet worshipped as the virgin incarnation of Devi; given away in marriage in order to gain merit in the next world, yet valued for the material wealth she can transfer to her marital family.” (Krishnan and Dighe: 1990)

The Committee on status of women states that “status realised through roles. This brings into focus the rights and opportunities provided to women by the state and socio-cultural institutions to perform these roles which may not reinforce each other” (As cited in Dolly Phukan).

There are several efforts made by the Indian Governments in India and the International Organisations in the global set up, to recognise women as equal as the men, and Women’s Rights as the Human Rights. In Indian constitution also, it is in black and white, that there should be no inequality among its people in respects of caste, creed, religion, sex, language etc. but Indian

‘women’s lives (Kapur&Cossman: 197) continue to be characterised by pervasive discrimination and substantive inequality’. Regarding the status and position on women in Assam, MitaDeka (2008) says“.....women’s struggles in Assam, whether in private or public life, are no exception.”

Assamese society is not an exception to that of the other parts of India. The values of patriarchy are sowed in the minds of the children, irrespective of sex, from their very childhood and that value structure is reinforced in later stages of life by education, social training, and also by religious and customary rules. This process continues from generation after generation making it more universal and unchallengeable. It gets more and more reinforced with the progress of time. By virtue of being masculine in gender, men possess and stick to the higher position than women in society. On the other hand, from cradle to grave, women are placed in inferior position. A girl child is not preferred or welcome, she gets lesser facilities for development of her individuality, in some societies she is not even regarded as complete individual, she is regarded as unqualified or unfit for decision making at any level; domestic, social or political. In this regard it can be mentioned that Manu has identified a man to be perfect-

----‘when he consists of three persons united, his wife, himself and his son; thus have learned Brahmans announced this maxim: ‘The husband is even one person with his wife’(Manu) as cited in Martin,E.R. Marry.

From their early childhood, girls are taught to respect the male members of the family as well as of society and women from head to the foot, hold to the societal norms forever. Disrespect to men is an offence, whereas wife beating is a common practice, regarded as normal social phenomenon even in present day world. Violence against women, sexual harassment, rape etc. are found to be in prevalence in different degrees in all societies but these are being recognised as the normal occurrence. It is well stated below---

“The attitude of the society towards women, the socio-religious taboos associated with women, women’s own attitude and awareness towards their position in the society and the duties, rights, liabilities of women towards the society and her family are the factors which determine the status and position of women in a society.” (The North-East Network :2004).

So to speak, Assam, the Gateway of North East, an ample representation of the in vogue socio-cultural and political status of women of Assam itself, in different period of history, could be attained from the Assamese literatures in the form of Novels, stories, dramas and historian’s account in history books.

Sayed Abdul Malik, one of the most reputed literature of Assam, in his “Dhanya Nara TanuBhal” (Assamese) based on the life of SrimantaSankardeva and also uplift a brief sketch of Assamese culture, where he referred to a Sudra woman named Radhika Shanti who attained the glory by remaining a chaste and proved it by successfully fetching water from the river Tambuwanti and pouring it to the embankment of the river to strengthen the embankment in order to save the village from flood (Mallik, S.A.:1998). Moreover, the devotion towards her husband even at the cost of her life was regarded as ideal woman. A higher status of women particularly in the royal families, wives of Brahmanas, who were devoted towards their husbands, was compared with Hindu Goddesses in relation to Hindu God (Nath, J.:1992, Barua, S.L.: 2002).

According to J. Nath, beginning from the Brahmanas, Smritis and Puranas some of which were composed as late as the 12th century A.D., the entire ancient and early medieval literature ascribes a low civic status to women. The available literature depict the picture that much emphasis was laid on chastity of women and widow re-marriage was condemned (Nath. J.: 1992).

“The redactors of the Mahabharata do not approve of the practice re-marriage of widows”. (As cited in Sen, Chitravanu)

So, it’s a fact that the status and position of women in Assamese society is, in no way, different from the other societies of India.

Neo-vaishnavism of Assam and Women

The low position of women is also reinforced by the religious literatures written by the different saints of Assam. In any society, there cannot be prevailed social harmony where half of the population is discriminated. The women had been always at the “receiving end” (DevGoswami, Ranjit Kumar: 2005) in the male dominated society. Sankardevasays, “The dire illusions created by women—the most hideous of all illusions”

Men thought about their own emancipation and looked upon women as distraction from the spiritual path. It is always easy to externalize the problem and blame someone. One who is not strong enough to protest generally becomes scapegoat. Sankardeva like many other Bhakti saints also discriminated against the women. In the ‘Neo-Vaishnavism’ women are not allowed to enter in the main prayer hall i.e. ‘KirtanGhar’.(DevGoswami, Ranjit Kumar: 2005)

The literature like Katha Guru Charit record that women are inherently selfish in nature, irreligious, addicted to sexual pleasure. It further records that Shankardeva who is sometimes recorded as comparatively liberal in his attitudes towards women are full of illusions and mesmerism and even a sudden look at a woman would destroy all sorts of devotion. According to him, therefore, a wise man ought to have tried to avoid companionship of women as far as possible (Baruah, S.L.:1992).

Property and Inheritance

“The law is wholly masculine: it is created and executed by our type or class of the man nature. The framers of all legal compacts are thus restricted to the masculine stand-point of observation to the thoughts, feelings, and biases of men. The law, then, could give us no representation as women, and therefore, no impartial justice, even if the present law-makers were honestly intent upon this; for we can be represented only by our peers.”---Siegel, R.B:1994

In the stringent patriarchy society like India, the Father of a Hindu family is adored as the Roman God of the pre-historic Roman Empire. According to the Manu, wives and off-springs of a particular family cannot have the property, except a son, but he has the access after death of his father. It is well stated in the following passage....

“Manu said that three persons, a wife, a son and a slave are declared by law to have in general no wealth exclusively their own; the wealth which they may earn is regularly acquired for the man to whom they belong. Similarly Narada believed in the view that a son could be independent only if his parents are dead; during their lifetime he is dependent even though he is grown old. So, in a

male-controlled family females and offspring did not have property rights. The wife was placed into the set of possessions and slaves.”---- As cited in Bhandari , A &Jaswani,U)

A daughter cannot claim for the property of her father, according to Manu. It is noteworthy that a family is composed of both the sons and daughters may be married and unmarried. Sons can have the survivorship, but a girl cannot have that except the **stridhan**.

Before the enactment of the Property Rights Act in 1956, like the other parts of India, women were debarred from the property rights in Assam also. But it should be noted that in spite of the fact that women are legally entitled to have a share in the parent’s property, they hardly exercise this right either due to ignorance, or due to the fear of having strained relationship with their parents and siblings.

Mitadeka in her article “**Gender Disparity and Legal awareness in Assam**” cited TilottamaMisra, where Misra (2007) stated the case of a Koch women of Assam where the woman appealed for the inheritance of her father’s property, but the case was dismissed by the court on the ground that ‘though the Koches are aborigines of Assam, they are governed by the Dayabhaga school of Hindu law.

The economic dependence, lack of property rights lead women to the secondary position in a particular society. This is one of the indications of the imbalanced power relations between men and women. And this dependence is rooted in the minds of the men so deeply that most of the times they take the chance to exploit her physically and mentally. Sometimes this situation become so adverse that women are violated and deprived of the normal life being left as a slave.



Dr.JagjitKhosla in his research article “Gender Based Violence” pinpointed on some existing norms in our society which cause the occurrence of some violence against women in a particular society. Among them one of the important causes “Lack of Property Rights” has been shown as one of the causes of violence against women in the global as well as in India too.

Stridhana

The concept of Stridhana was one of the core practices in India from the age of the Dharamashastras. Now the concept of Stridhan has assumed the shape of dowry of an Assamese society in particular and in India in general. In this regard MitaDeka cited thus...

“.....over the next millennium, the scope of stridhana gradually expanded to include almost every category of property (Agnes: 1999). In upper Assam a corresponding concept for the security of the bride is joutuk” (Assamese version of the English word Dowry is Joutuk).

In the pre-colonial period indigenous Assamese women of Assam also were debarred from getting any property in her ownright. The woman had right only to Shridhanaor dowry given to her at the time of her marriage. This economicdisability of women continued upto 1937 when the British Government enacted the Hindu Women's Right toProperty Act and enforced it on all the Hindus of the country. By this Act a Hindu wife had the right of enjoyment of her husband's share in the jointly inherited property during her life time, but she had no right to alienate the property.(Assam Gazetteer)

The Hindu Succession Act was enacted in 1956, which provides for a uniform pattern all Hindus with respect to intestate succession and thus removed the inequality between men and women, for inheriting the property. Now sons, daughters, widows and mother can inherit equally. In the matter of adoption also, women had no choice of adoption before 1955, nor could a female child be legally adopted. After enactment of this Act even an unmarried women can adopt a child independently subject to the conditions that she is of sound mind, not a minor, nor married, if married, whose marriage has been dissolved or whose husband is dead or completely and finally renounces the worlds or has ceased to be a Hindu or has been declared by a court of competent jurisdiction to be of unsound mind.

Though these laws have given the rights to property as well as adoption to the Hindu women, in practice, the number of women exercising these rights is very negligible even in urban areas of Assam. The villagers are not aware of these rights even today. Rightly speaking, Hindu Succession Act has a very little field practice in Assam. Gadhon or bride price is another practice which practices in Assam. Regarding this MitaDeka says,

“Another practice prevalent in Assam is the “Gadhon” or “Bride price”, popular mostly in western Assam and among the tribal societies such as those of Koches, Tiwas or Lalungs, Dimasas or Kocharies, Bodos and Rabhas.”---MitaDeka :2008

The practice of “Gadhan” of Assam, which was also present in the age of Mahabharata in the name of “Sulka”, where would be son-in-law gifts according to the demands made by the bride’s father. The prevalence of this practice lowered the status of women as objects to be sold. It is stated in Chitravanu Sen...

“...in the Mahabharata narratives the system of payment of bride fees (sulka) figures prominently. Bhismapayas huge wealth to buy Madri for Pandu(1.105.5).”As cited in Sen, Chitrabhanu: 2005

Joint Family System

As in the other parts of the country the joint family system prevalent in the indigenous Assamese society and the eldest man of the family is accepted as the head of the family. In the rural areas of Assam the number of the joint families is larger. In the joint family the eldest male member is generally the head of the family; all the land and property of the family being recorded in his name. He prevails influence on all other members of his family and decisions taken by him are final in all matters connected with the household (Gazetteer of Assam). In the joint families men and women

are differentiated in their roles and status, where men are regarded as authority, women are as subjects managing the household chores.

“The joint family discouraged public participation of women because the greater authority of older women prevented younger women from breaking out of traditionally approved female patterns.”---
Bhatt, B.D & Sharma S.R.:1992(Women and Social Development)

But it appears that the joint families have been now disintegrating rather rapidly. The number of the households in the villages has been increasing. Thus increase can mainly be attributed to the break-up of many joint families in the villages. But it cannot be said that joint family system is totally erased from the Assamese society.

Matriarchal System

The Hindus, the Muslims, the Jains, the Buddhists and the Christians of this State follow the patriarchal system of family and as such the father is the head of the family, at whose death is sons inherit his property. Among the tribals of Assam, the Garos, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Lalungs follow the matriarchal system of family in which the main rule is that the daughters instead of the sons inherit the property. Under this system, the major share of the property goes to the youngest daughter who is supposed to live in her mother's house along with her husband and children and to maintain the family. Other tribes of Assam like the Bodo-Kacharis, the Karbis, the Dimasakacharis, the Kukis, the Hmars, the Mizos and also the Shyams or Aitanian follow patriarchal system of family.(ibid)

Dowry System

In ancient indigenous society of Assam, whether it is tribal or non-tribal, the bridegroom's family offered some cash, ornaments or other kinds as gadhan(price of the person) of the bride to the father or guardian of the bride. In case of tribal it was generally the price of methon (wild buffalo). Even now in some interior remote areas, this practice prevails, among the Mishings, Bodo- Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas, etc. Generally ornaments, clothes, utensils including other household goods, cash, etc., are given willingly by the bride's parent. Every family or bridegrooms expects some utensils, ornaments, clothing and furniture to accompany the bride. These, however, remain the property of the bride. In Assam, a dowry though not compulsory, is known as Joutukand in old times. The aristocratic families even sent some servants with the bride to the groom's house as joutuk for the bride. The old aristocratic families in Assam consider the demand of dowry as detrimental to their prestige.

Inter-caste Marriage

Some decades ago caste endogamy was somewhat rigid among the people of Assam. In spite of this rigidity there took place some inter caste marriages. But now-a-days inter-caste marriage and inter-religion marriages are commonly accepted by all sections of the urban people specially the educated section. Spread of education, liberal ideas, economic independence of men and women, tolerance and many other factors are responsible for the break of this traditional custom. But it cannot be said that inter-caste marriage is totally accepted in Assam. It will be cleared from the following citing....

“In many villages of the rural areas of Assam, the inter-caste marriages are still considered a taboo. Any violation would lead to expulsion from the caste and the person concerned would be excommunicated by his own society.”---Gazetteer of Assam

Re-marriage of the widows

Among the caste Hindus the widow re-marriage is not favourably looked upon by tradition and custom. Though the Hindu Widow Marriage Act, 1856 has allowed such marriage in all caste of Hindus yet such marriage has hardly taken place. Even to-day, in the urban areas of the State, the percentage of widow marriage is very small. Among the scheduled tribes and poor peasants, however, widow marriage is allowed though no religious rite is performed in such marriage. Among the Muslims, the widow marriage is allowed by their personal laws and even then the percentage of such marriage among them is not high. The widow marriages are permitted among the Christians. The economically most backward castes or Scheduled castes who consider a woman helpful as an earning member generally accepted widow marriage. The State consists of people coming from different States of India and they generally follow their old custom in respect of widow marriage. (Gazetteer of Assam)

Violence Against Women

As a matter of fact, Assamese society is also in the grips of patriarchy which in turn justifies wide gender gap, gender inequality, low literacy rate, economically dependent, powerless, and many more. The research work of Bidisha Mahanta on Assamese women reveals the facts that....

“.....only 11% of women in Assam participate in all the four household decisions making whereas in India the corresponding figure is 20%. More women of Assam are prone to sexual violence in comparison to India. When we analyse women’s attitude towards wife beating, we find that less women of Assam support the cases of wife beating as compared to entire India. Women access and control over resource is far less in Assam (26.6%) in comparison to 50% in India.” (Mahanta, B.)

“Especially in the state of Assam, Domestic violence against unmarried women both in the rural and semi-rural and urban areas can be seen. They occur in high frequency in all parts of the state. Likewise marital rape and destitution of women, which leads to trafficking and forced prostitution, are also serious issues in the state”. (H. Sahu and M. Pradhan)

“It is painful to note that in spite of theoretical constitutional equality for all (men & women); separate personal laws ensure that men and women are not equal. Male guardianship prevails even today and ‘marriage’ for women translates into subordination in ways it does not for men. Such paradoxes in the formal and informal areas continue to exclude women from an equal footing with men in free India.”(Gupta, N.)

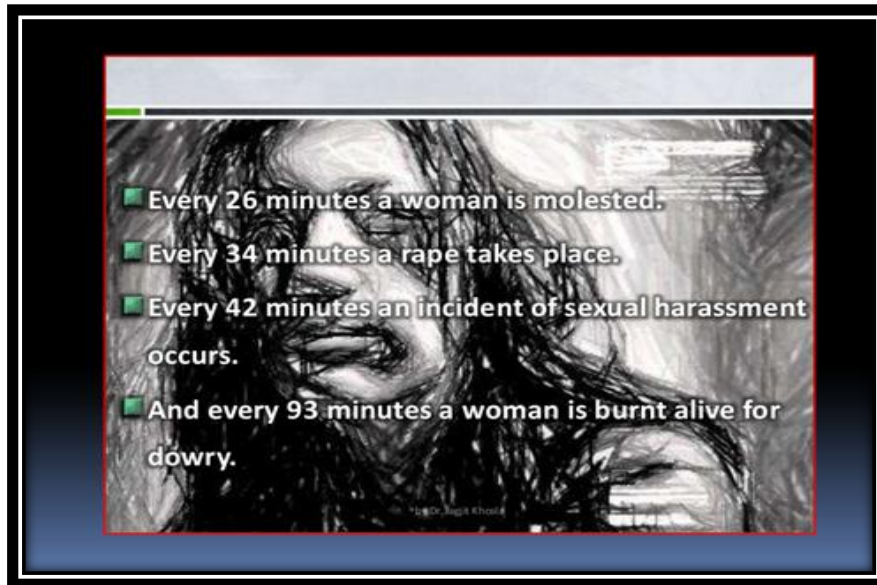
“Violence against women in the north eastern state of Assam has become a cause for severe concern. A stark rise in cases of sexual violence and harassment, even in the form of leering and taunting, leaves women in vulnerable positions within public spaces.”

<http://feministsindia.com/violence-against-women-need-for-reforms-in-assam-police-machinery/>

If, all the violence that have done on women, if we put them in a bundle and rolled into one, then

Earth would not hold it
The sky could not enfold it
It could not be lighted and warmed by the Sun!

---(as cited in Navneet Kumar Mishra)



The figure showing the violence occurs against women India

<http://www.slideshare.net/drjagjit/gender-based-violence-against-women>

Victims of certain kind violence symbolise the ‘powerlessness’ of a certain groups of people in a society. It indicates the deprivation, denial and the secondary status of women in a male dominated society. Navneet Kr. Mishra says violence against women is a manifestation of historically power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of all advancement of women. The occurrence of Violence in a particular society indicates the unequal power distribution—both physical and economic between the sexes: in patriarchal society powers are centred to men, all the institutions or organisations are male dominated signifies that women are insignificant in such a society.

Patriarchy can be seen everywhere in Assam. From birth to death women have to live in a strictly stringent patriarchal society in Assam. So, they live in a traumatic condition struggling for own space of justice and equality. Girl child is discriminated from her birth and is enforced to live the life of a second-grade citizen. In India, duo to impact of some patriarchal institutions, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, the overall status and position of women are much lower than men; therefore a male child is preferred over a female child. The impact of this can be seen in Assam also, According to 2001 census, in Assam, the sex ratio between male and female was 932. The whole scenario will be cleared from citation given below---

“Women of Assam are still shackled to traditions, customs, age-old superstitious and beliefs, orthodoxy, dogmatism like witch hunting and conservatisms. Purdah system, dowry system, early marriage, widowhood are still a strong part of women in Indian society in general and Assam

in particular. They remain suppressed by their husbands, in-laws, spend most of their time in household chores and remain economically dependent throughout life and viewed as inferior in the man dominated society. In the joint families, they have no freedom, no privacy and no good treatment from the in-laws". (M. Tineshwari Devi)

"Feminists felt that women had been the poor victims of male oppression and exploitation, and expressed anger and strong resentment against injustice done to mankind."

"In a patriarchal culture, what we get is a masculinist definition of ideals and images of women. These ideals and visions are not women's creations. They are born out of their own experiences"(Ghadijally, Rehana)

It is noteworthy that, regarding Assamese society and status and position of women in it, different types of interpretations can be found in the writings of different scholars. Such as Dolly Phukan says, "... due to the assimilation of many tribal socio-economic and religious norms and values, in most of the cases the social behaviour and the attitude of the society towards women was somewhat liberal in comparison to the other parts of India". Similarly, RamitaDhar (2004) says, "Assamese women enjoyed the aroma of freedom as well as better social status in comparison to her counterparts in other parts of India. She was never kept under the total subordination disdainfully".

But in reality Assamese women are living the same traumatic life as the others are experiencing in India, being the victims of patriarchal crimes committed by men. One of the most revered Assamese religious literatures "**KATHA GUR CHARITA**" says that "**Women are inherently selfish in nature, irreligious, addicted to sexual pleasure.**"--- Katha Guru Charita, as cited in Dolly Phukan. This sentence written in Katha Guru Charita by Assamese religious saints reflects the Manu's dictum that---

"Women are having habit of lying, wasting time, an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness and treachery and bad conduct".--- Manu (as cited in Chakrabarti, Uma)

"Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; thinking that it is enough if he is a man, they give themselves to the handsome and the ugly."(Manu)

In SatapathaBrahmana it was held that a woman, a sudra and a crow are the embodiments of untruth, sin and darkness (Uma Chakrabarti). Again it can be mentioned here that SrimantaSankar deva, the Vaishnavite Religious Saint of Assam, though often he is regarded for his liberal attitude towards women, commented that women are full of illusions and mesmerism and even a sudden look at women would destroy all sorts of divinity and devotions. According to him.... therefore a wise man ought to have tried to avoid companionship of women as far as possible."(Barua, S.L)

Following are some of the practices that lower the women's position in Assam in all periods¹:-

(A) The concept of Hypergamous (anuloma) and hypogamous (pratiloma) marriages by definition denigrates women. A marriage where a boy of upper caste marries a lower caste was approved and called Anuloma. On the other hand marriage of women of ritually pure groups with men of lower

¹Available at

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/37459/9/09_chapter%203.pdf. Retrieved on 18.11.2015.

rituals status doesn't receive a similar approval and known as Pratiloma. Moreover if a man of the low caste marries a girl of the high caste, then they were both considered as degraded and impure.

(B) During the medieval Assamese society punishments like excommunication could be evoked for transgressing the norms. Women as a guardian of purity has not to lower herself but she could be raised high.

(C) Another symptom is the differential status of bride giver and the bride taker, where the latter is considered to be always superior. The social status of the groom's party was always superior in comparison to the bride and her family. This is still following in Assamese society.

(D) There was an important practice on women in Assam that determined social division of labour in Assamese society. The tasks for women were specific like men in Assamese society. In agriculture, for instance, women could engage themselves in water regulation, transplanting, and weeding, reaping, thrashing but not in plugging. Women of the upper caste were withdrawn from the outside work.

(E) Although women of Assam or any other parts of India did not constitute a caste by themselves, yet they naturally took the caste of their husbands. Accordingly they had to follow rules and restrictions. For example tradition prohibited the Brahmins widows from eating non-vegetarian foods. Again one thing was common among the women of all castes that they were always considered as subordinate to male members.

(F) The recommendations and prohibitions for sudras (lower caste) and women were same on many occasions, for example, the prohibition of the UpanayanaSanskara for both women and sudras or denial of religious privileges for Sudras in Assam. This also points out the lower position of a woman in traditional Assamese society.

(G) There are some traditions for women also, prevailing among many castes in Assam, which were practiced during pregnancy, delivery period, menstrual courses, birth of a child etc. which were totally linked with status of women.

In a traditional Assamese society, followed a number of rites and used several charms during the time of her pregnancy in order to avoid the possibility of being attacked by the evils spirits. Even after the delivery, women were provided with a separate room for certain days and a dhai (care taker of the child and mother) of low caste assisted her and many more.

(H) Though the practice of child marriage was not so relevant and large in traditional Assamese society, yet it could not be told that it was not practiced totally particularly among Brahmin caste the tradition of "AagBeya" was done before menstruate. It was due to the early child marriages at very low that could not provide proper education among girls, and also free movement hampered. The child rearing, caring etc. also had it be done from a very low ages.

Regarding the position of women in the ancient and medieval period of Assam history, it can be assumed that, as an integral part of the Indian society, the Assamese womenfolk were also guided

by the same Indian beliefs and customs prevalent in other parts of the country. That is why; they had to accept everything like the other Indian women more or less².

Concluding it can be said that Assamese society is no way different from that of the other parts of the world as there can be seen gender stratifications, patriarchal practices, inequalities between men and women. The values of patriarchy are sowed in the minds of the children, irrespective of sex, from their very childhood and that value structure is reinforced in later stages of life by the other socio-cultural institutions. Women of Assam are still the victims of the violence which are justified by the patriarchal practices, norms, customs and the rituals. One of the horrible things in a woman's life regarding class or caste system and society itself in India is that these systems divide the whole women sexuality into various categories such as on the class basis—upper, middle or the lower, in terms of caste, Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. These two systems perpetuate the bondages for women belonging to the so called upper caste by imposing a number of taboos on them in Assam as well.

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² ibid