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## “Patriarchal Traditions” And “female Subjugation” In Colonial Assam: Continuity V/s Paradigm Shift

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### Abstract:

*Quest for reforms in the existing social order of India began in the 19th century and was more or less an outcome of India's encounter with the colonial subjugation. There are disagreements to the views as to whether these changes were a response to colonial onslaught or not. In this context the current paper is an exploration into the change in perception of women in the then Assamese society, if radical break from the past and transformation in the ideas and ideals set in or was there more continuity than change in this aspect.*

### KEYWORD:

colonization, transformation, radical break, continuity.

### INTRODUCTION

The other half of mankind, the lot of women is “pressed” in all possible ways, suppressed, depressed and oppressed supported by a huge cannon of scriptural traditions and religious text of ancient times. And there exists an unending institutionalized methods of subjugating her- by dowry, female feticide, child marriage, rape, purdah, and the most spectacular one, perhaps the most inhuman tradition of subjugation that ever existed and will exist in the history of human civilization- “SATIDAH” or 'burning the widow alive in the funeral pyre of her deceased husband'. These are features that have plagued the existence of mankind. A whole lot of discourse, research and theory on subjugation of Indian women, its comparison with that of the European women and the women of the other third world countries are never-ending themes of inquiry. The current paper aims to look at the problem of “women subjugation” in Colonial Assam vis- a- vis the contentious tradition that made its way into Assam as she encountered colonial hegemony.

The paper aims at looking at the institution of “Patriarchy”, the effect there upon with the incoming of colonial intervention and various ideas of western liberalism. The paper is an enquiry into whether “transformation” or “continuity” of traditional ideas ruled the Colonial Assamese society on the issue of “female subjugation”. The paper has referred to literary journals published in the 19th -20th century in Assamese from Assam. Based on the writings in these journals, the currents study would seek to see as to what kind of transformations in ideas set into the tradition of “female subjectivity” and “patriarchal social order” with the advent of colonialism and western liberal ideas. That the writings of the journals of the 19th 20th Assamese journals extensively addressed the issue of patriarchal domination like “dowry”, “child-marriage”, “barring of widow remarriage” is the most striking features of these journals. Moreover since the writings in these magazines were contributions by both men and women writers, therefore it is possible to get glimpses into the emerging new ideas on the issues mentioned above. The paper would mainly explore the changes that set into the problems of “child marriage”, “female education” and “widow-remarriage”. The paper has looked at 'WOMEN' as a monolithic category, irrespective of the fact that women of different stratum of the society ahs different problems to face and resist. However these magazines were mostly the handiwork of 'Hindu' upper class men and women. In brief, it is doubtlessly arguable that striking alterations if not break from all past traditions were visible in these writings.

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Notwithstanding the fact that several contradictions constrained their activities, striking change in perceptions of women and the ideas causing her subjugation were taking place. It is rational to give special emphasis on women's writings because it was the only platform where they would speak their minds against their sub-ordination in the social existence not only in Assam but throughout the sub-continent.

Indian culture's encounter with the colonial onslaught resulted in socio-religious reforms leading to considerable improvement in the position of women. Most writings negated the alarming rate of spread of western ideas and appealed to the readers to respect and upheld the Indian traditions and that the inspiration for cause of women liberation is to be found in India's own history. This is visible in the writings of the intellectuals of the period under survey. But that is not to say that the modern liberal tradition in India was a derivative discourse from the west, that it was only secondary in character. Tanika Sarkar has negated this idea of robbing India of its historical complexities in the following brief line-

“...I do not believe that colonial discourse (itself an undifferentiated and, unhistoricised stereotyped construct) ever operated as a fully hegemonic power, eradicating and completely overhauling all other histories.....”

At the onset of the paper it is imperative to say that the Assamese society was patrilineal and patriarchal in nature. Polygamy was not common except among the ruling and the aristocratic classes. The custom of purdah existed but crept in quite late. Child marriage existed but was not rampant. “Sati” as a custom was never in practice in Assam. The custom of marriage of widow was prevalent but was not widely practiced. The Brahmin widows were required to undergo all penances of widowhood like fasting, austerity and chastity etc. this custom later flowed into the lives of her 'lower-caste' fellow sisters. Dowry was not rampant but was prevalent no-doubt.

The journals 'JONAKI' and 'GHAR-JEUTI' under survey have extensive articles dedicated to the “WOMEN QUESTION” and there is ample scope to measure the changes and transformation and contradictions in the society and intellectuals towards the WOMEN's lot. Ratneswar Mahanta's article 'VIVAH' is an excellent glimpse into the prevailing social customs of the then Assamese society, the changes creeping in and a strand of opinion and attitude to these changes, especially concerning women', their position and status and impending 'emancipation' from patriarchal constructs. MAHANTA is supposedly and apparently critical of child marriage. He considers it unethical and illogical to marry off girls of 5 or 9 years as to him that is a very tender age to be married for a woman. Following Manu's precept he considers 10/12 years as the right marriageable age for girls. He also conveys the idea of the rising trend of the society then to marry off their daughters at that age. The general essence of his piece is however anti-women. He conveys the idea that it is unethical not to marry off girls immediately after her menstrual cycle starts. He is also a rigid follower of 'MANUSAMHITA' in selection of bride to be married. In the entire piece only mention of women's right to see the man she is supposed to marry found place. But in case of the prospective groom's bride selection is given attention. Understandably various construct various constructs disabling and paralyzing women has been and is appealed to be followed. 'Caste' disabilities related ideas found ample and liberal attention in his piece following the traditions of Rishi GAUTAMA and Rishi ATRI barring marriage between a higher caste man to a lower caste woman. Opining the acceptability of marriage between a girl of 12 to that of a man of 25 and above he says that not all; precepts of Manu is relevant in the present society but most of them are to be followed religiously in case of marriage. It is striking to note that the writer has extensively used the biological feature of “menstruation” in women to deprive, subordinate and degrade her, implicitly though. He is subscribing to Manu's precept that post-menstruation women become essentially nasty and starved and as such is needed to be married off immediately. He is appreciative of and appeals the Assamese to imitate Bengal's tradition of marrying off girls before her menstrual cycle begins and immediately sending her to her husband's house unlike in Assam where a tendered aged girl is retained in her parent's house. The 'chastity' and 'honour' of women is given undue importance which is another instrument of women subordination.

The views of Ratneswar Mahanta are criticized by Kamal Chandra Sharma . at the very onset he considered Mahanta's view as incoherent and equally irrelevant in today's existence. He also questions the acceptability and logic of all the precepts expounded by the ancient text of MANU and YAGNAVALKYA. Busting the irrelevance of another precept of Manusamhita in the society then, Sharma writes that like it is not possible and viable for the priests today to dedicate themselves solely to the 'service-of-the –king', it is also irrelevant today, keeping the changing times, to marry off child girls to advanced aged man. Late marriage of a girl does not entitle her and her family being ostracized. Social customs are to be redefined keeping pace with the changing times. He also vehemently criticized Mahanta's idea of following Bengal's tradition in Assam to send off child wives of grown up husbands to the latter's house to co-habit with him for the sake of knowing each other well. He also expressed deep remorse and regret on Mahanta's ideas of hatred, degradation and deprivation towards women community. He criticized Mahanta for picking up special text from Manu specially to degrade women.

However there is another side to his writing. In fact in both the original piece by Mahanta and its review by Sharma is that there is a visible inner contradiction inherent in both the minds, especially in that of the latter's. while Mahanta is conformist to most of the convention and tradition of Indian Culture of women deprivation prevalent then, but make feeble attempt at some negligible aspect of women's emancipation like increasing the marriageable age of women slightly, unsatisfactorily though from 5/9 years to 10/12 years. In the latter, the inner contraction is more apparent. He is supportive of the social reformation zeal and the trend of the age i.e., the issue of 'women's emancipation'. Despite that he is unable to cast off the convention ridden customs that was inbuilt in his inner self. Therefore the contradiction and conflict of the patriarchal culture constructs and liberal aspirations dissuades a complete transformation of his ideals. The later part of the essay is visibly conformist to the patriarchal disabilities and in-equal treatment to women, the acceptance of women as only subordinate partners to their husbands. He is perhaps apprehensive of social criticism for propagating “UN-HINDU” views and ideas. He clarifies that it is acceptable to marry off Brahmin girls at tender age and accepted to agree to Mahanta's view in this issue. He confirms that it is not possible to impose one culture on another and as such changes ought to be gradual. He is critical of child marriage and its resultant abuses but is appreciative of Hindu cultural traditions and accepts to have faith in Hindu tradition of training girls to faithful and loyal partners of their able partners of their husbands. He ends with the following line-

“Knowledge of convention, wisdom, character and nature of traditions makes one appreciate traditions and that faith, devotion and love makes a marriage a lasting and fruitful”

The spirit of radicalism and transformation in favour of women's emancipation gradually suffers setback in Sharma's essay and inherent contradiction over rules his radical spirit thereby making him succumb to convention. Nevertheless change is visible in an embryonic stage though when he expresses the view of sending girls not less than 16-17 years to her husband's house even if she is married at an age earlier than that.

In Panindra Nath's “Our development or underdevelopment” the writer fed the readers with some comparisons between pre-colonial and colonial Assam in social and economic aspect. The criticism he levels against Indians subordination to colonial political and economic power is nationalist in essence. But his views on women before and after the British and western ideas came in is pretty similar to that of the social and religious reform movement and the ideas associated with it in contemporary Bengal. He regrets the fact before British and western ideas intruded into the culture and tradition of India, women were akin to “Griha Lakshmi”, i.e., she was the goddess of the household who cooked, weaved, sowed, rearer, and bearer of children-in short confined exclusively to the household duties. But owing to “foreign” cultural tradition influence, women has lost interest in weaving, sowing and have become more inclined towards western outfit, dramas and engrossed in reading novels. 'Pre modern' women according to him were 'shy' but thanks to western influence, this attitude has disappeared today and is today defined as “uncivilized custom”. He is critical of 'new' women who are educated, anti-superstitious and “dressed like men”. He does not however clarify as to what kind of dress of women he refers to as “men like”. It is a kind of double war waged against colonial hegemony and against its intrusion in the inner domain and as such an attempt to protect ones identity from foreign influence. The current piece provokes the thought that it was akin to the idea that was then prevailing in Bengal, that is provoking laughter and open criticism at women trying to imitate western “memsahib” culture of use of cosmetics, wearing petticoat, blouses and sari (instead of sari alone), reading novels and expensive knitting work and ridding open carriages. In the current piece not all of these aspects were criticized but only the dress and 'new' culture which is foreign influenced is the target of ridicule.

Similar kinds of inner contradictions and clash between 'modern', 'liberal' ideology and conventional and traditional ways featured while looking at the issue of 'female education'. Gaurikanta Talukdar's rather long essay on “FEMALE EDUCATION” is a glimpse into the views prevalent on female education. He expresses rather ambiguous views on the issue. Without any mention of the kind of education curriculum preferable and desirable for women, he starts his essay with a rather partial view about the duties delivered by men and women in the world, which he says are not only different, but also unequal, the latter also easy. He held the view that the root of all evils and backwardness in the society lay in lack of 'women education' because an uneducated woman fails to bring up able sons to provide leadership to the nation and the society. Drawing upon the example of the mother of Napoleon, William Jones, Cromwell, Alfred the great, Washington were all educated and ambiguous ladies. The culture discouraging female education will be backward socially, economically, politically in art and craft and all other aspect as she fails to rear up able sons and competent husbands. The essay's essence conveys the idea that women's contribution towards the development of the nation and civilization is only indirect and not direct. Thus he quotes George Herbert- “An educated mother is equal to hundreds of teachers”

To him female education is indispensable to inspire future leadership. He regrets that knowing it



well that leadership of our future is the sole prerogative of women, yet the Assamese society is indifferent towards female education. Thus a contradiction and a deep unawareness and unwillingness towards female emancipation from patriarchal Bondage still engulfed the social order and outlook. Female education was considered indispensable and unobjectionable but the end of it is only begetting able sons, future leaders of society, nation, country and mankind. Female education seems to be considered of no need to the 'selves' of women, for self sufficiency, economic self sufficiency, and her desires to quench her thirst for knowledge. This view is generally visible in these 19th and 20th century journals and also both amongst the male and women writers well till the 3rd decade of the last century.

Bhuban Chandra Bhuyan's article “Women's status in Hindu Scriptures” is an important conjecture in the conflict between 'new' and 'convention' and the issue of 'women subjugation' amongst the followers of Hindu precepts of Colonial Assam. His script is interesting. He has based his argument on three points- 1) a firm believe in the validity of the myths and legends of ancient India 2) a meta narrative style.3) and the precepts of the ancient Hindu texts. Without substantiating his views he linearly narrates that owing to the indifference of the present Hindu society to the plight of the women and her subjugation beyond dignity is the root of the plight of India's lot today. this has happened in the past with Ravana for oppressing Tilottama and Sita in the RAMAYANA, Duryodhan for molesting Droupadi in the MAHABHARATA, with the Ahoms for disgracing and murdering Joymati. All of these faced downfall for disrespecting women. Citing Manu's text the writer appeals to the emotions of the hindus that the scriptures negates all deeds of a man as invalid who disregards women. He reinstates that Hindu religion preaches worshipping women. He mentions the celebrated women of ancient past- MAITREYI, GARGI, LOPAMODRA, APALA, BISWABARA, GHOSHA etc who are equally respect for composing slokas and hymns in the Vedas. He is negating the prevalent system of degrading women to the level of maids and animals to her husband and in laws.

Holiram Deka informs the readers in his essay “WOMEN'S RIGHTS” about the political progress of women in U.S.A. Even in Madras, a Chief justice's wife got elected to the municipal corporation. He sarcastically questioned the ladies that women subscribing to the idea of “Pati param guru” perhaps fails to see the progress of her fellow sisters.

Chandraprabha Das's article “disadvantages of child marriage” tries to restate that nowhere in the Vedas is there mention of child marriage or any support to it is to found in them. Thus the custom is not facilitated by ancient scriptures and texts and she considers it only a later interpretation. She again proves that how and where this evil crept into the “ARYAN CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION” is not known and no written proof thereof is to be found. Chandraprabha Das was a radical thinker to the cause of women rights and emancipation and ample evidence of t found in her writings. A spinster throughout, she derived from the ancient text the right of women to marry or spinsterhood. In the essay she reinstate that in the name of Rishis like Vashishtha, Yagnavalkya, Vyasa, Buddhayana, and the like child marriage has spread but these are later editions to the texts which rather supported adult marriage. She questions that the texts which are traditionally believed to be their compositions are actually so. She even cites from Manu who is accepted as the most competent law giver of the Hindus that he validates the spinsterhood of woman if capable groom is not found. But the ignorant followers of Hinduism are violating his precepts by marrying off their child daughters. She however also expresses gratitude and satisfaction at the falling rate of child marriage in the society facilitated by the spread of education and awareness in the society. However she is critical of the rampant practice of child marriage in those districts of Assam that are nearer to Bengal.

Thus throughout the issues of these widely read journals of colonial Assam, contradiction and self contradictory views on female education and child marriage were still visible. Thus changes in perception of women if not radical break from the past has begun to take embryonic shape in the period under survey. There are some drawbacks in these writing like it do not amply deal with the issue of Widow Remarriage, do not address the various substratums of women on the basis of caste and class and considered her almost as a monolithic whole. Moreover there is also no mention of data supported facts on the decreasing rate of Child marriage and increase in rate of female education. They only mention the changes therein casually. Nonetheless one can trace the coming of a positive change in perception of the society on the position of women and the various issues related to her.

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- 1 Eradicated by legislation in 1829
  - 2 Lata Mani, Contentious traditions : The debate on Sati in Colonial India, Cultural Critique, Vol.7, pp 119-56
  - 3 Reforms were of two strands, one sought to transform the indigenous society while the other was restless to 'defend' the indigenous social order.
  - 4 Tanika Sarkar, 1993, p 62
  - 5 Jahanabi Gogoi Nath, 1992
  - 6 Scholars believe that it began with the Assamese contact with Bengal and North India.
  - 7 SATI was first mentioned in a 16th century text, YOGINI TANTRA, believed to have been composed in Assam
  - 8 Dr. Swarnalata Barua, 2009
  - 9 It was initially not practiced and it is un-known when the evil custom crept into the Assamese culture.
  - 10 JONAKI, 6th issue, June-July 1889. Pp.54-57, 67-68, 78-80 (in the compilation of all the editions of Jonaki, 1st part)
  - 11 The ancient law giver of India
  - 12 The law book by Manu
  - 13 Jonaki, Kamal Chandra Sharma, 11th-12th issue, November- December 1889, pp.110-111
  - 14 As he himself calls it in his article referred to.
  - 15 Jonaki, Kamal Chandra Sharma, 11th-12th issue, November- December 1889, pp.110-111 (translation mine)
  - 16 Jonaki, 9th issue, 1890, July/August, pp.181-83
  - 17 He calls it “purush-Bheshita” or 'dressed like men'
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