

STATUS OF WOMEN

IN ASSAM



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The present book is a compendium of the proceedings of the Seminar on "Status of Women in Non-Tribal Societies of Assam" held in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University, on 4-5 October 1988. The Seminar was sponsored jointly by the North-Eastern Regional Centre, Shillong of the Indian Council of Social Research, New Delhi and the Dibrugarh University.

The term 'Non-Tribal' used in the theme connotes the Assamese Hindu Population not included under the category of plains tribal and hill tribal and the term 'status' covers 'both traditional and emerging. The proceedings in this publication deals with the status of non-tribal Assamese women from early times till date in different fields like Family, Society, Economy, Law, Politics and Administration, etc. They discuss how the socio-religious mores prevalent in our patriarchal society are working as impediments towards women's progress and how women are exploited in the family and the society. They also suggest ways and means for improving the present situation and making women aware of their rights and potentialities with a view to removing disparities between men and women in enjoying human rights and opportunities.

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STATUS OF WOMEN IN ASSAM

(With Special Reference to Non-Tribal Societies)

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Editor's Note

This work is a compendium of seventeen papers presented in a Seminar on "Status of Women in Non-Tribal Societies of Assam" sponsored jointly by the North-Eastern Regional Centre (NERC), Shillong of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi and the Dibrugarh University. The Seminar was held in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University on 4-5 October 1988. It was one of the series of seminars sponsored by the NERC-ICSSR to study the status of women in North-Eastern India.

The term 'non-tribal' used in the theme connotes the Assamese Hindu Population, not included under the category of plains tribal and the hill tribal and the term 'status' meaning position covers 'both traditional and emerging', thus covering the status of women from earliest times till date in different fields like family, society, economy, law, politics and administration, health care etc.

The non-tribal society of Assam is influenced by the socio-religions more prevalent in our patriarchal society which are impediments to women's progress. As pointed out by Dr.(Ms.) Yosodhara Bagchi, Professor, Department of English and Director of Women's Studies Centre of Jadavpur University in her inaugural speech of the seminar, the concepts like 'mohini', 'Kamini' associated with women which only promote their degradation must be changed, and unless women are treated equal with men and given equal opportunities to develop their talents, their real progress is not possible. Women must come forward to free themselves from the socio-religious shackles and establish their strength and potentialities. In the words of Dr. N.K. Basu, retired Principal of the D.H.S. Kanoi Commerce College, Dibrugarh, who presided over the Inaugural Session of the seminar, the traditional Indian concept of *Sahadharmini* must be changed by that of *Sahakarmini*, so that women can be equal with men in all respects and contribute to the progress of the country.

Patriarchy perpetuates the subjugation of women. Although the Assamese Hindu Society because of its tribal

base is much liberal in many respects, particularly in regard to women, still the over-all picture, as pointed out by Dr. S.M. Dubey, Professor of Sociology, Dibrugarh University and Dr. (Ms.) S.L. Baruah, Director of the Seminar in their key-note speeches, is not a happy one. Long put under male domination, most of them do not dare or are hesitant to play leadership roles in the society, even when an opportunity presents itself. It was expected that Assamese women with their remarkable heroic roles in the country's struggle for freedom would be making rapid strides in all spheres of development after Independence. But it is regrettable that despite a proud cultural heritage, they have failed to achieve much. Status is related with society's attitude towards women, socio-religious moves and values, women's awareness of the problem, progress of education, policy of the government etc. Only some aspects of the main theme of the Seminar are covered in the papers published in the work.

Although the status of Assamese women, compared with their fellow sisters in many other parts of India is much high, so that evils *sati*, dowry and bride-burning could not gain any ground in Assam, society being patriarchal, women are not treated equal with men and subject to various forms of ill-treatment or torture. An idea of this is given by Dr. (Ms.) Karabi Deka Hazarika in the paper captioned "Status of Assamese Women in the Family and the Society as reflected in Assamese Literature". The paper presents a very lively picture of different roles played by women in both upper and common class homes and societies as depicted in Assamese literature from the time of Sankaradeva (1449-1569) till today. She states that 'Bhadari' of Lakshminath Bezbaruah symbolises the unsophisticated rural Assamese women bored with house-hold drudgery and domination of an arrogant husband, yet either so full of mercy or so bound by tradition that she willingly shifts/her husband's guilt of physically assaulting her to her own shoulders to save him from the verdict of imprisonment by the court. Dr. Deka Hazarika rightly contends that things have not much changed since the days of Bhadari and although now-a-days, a wife in non-tribal societies is not physically assaulted like Bhadari, she is subjected to serious mental or psychological torture.

But torture to women is not confined to her family alone. Society and state vie with each other to suppress and victimise

her. Ms. Anju Barkataky in her paper "Women and Violence in Non-Tribal Societies of Assam" contends that women of the poorer class in particular are the most victimised section of our society, because apart from the general victimisation on men and women of this class, they are victims of traditional mores of a patriarchal society. She speaks of violence on women by different agencies and women's struggle against violence in the context of non-tribal societies of Assam.

In the 'varna-jati affiliated society', the status of a woman is similar to that of a sudra. This is discussed in the paper captioned "Social Attitude towards Women in Medieval Assam" written by Ms. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath.

Relating the "Status of Women in Assamese Muslim Society", Ms. Farida Sherfuddin states that there is no marked distinction between an Assamese Muslim women and her counterpart in non-tribal Hindu families so far as status is concerned, which is greatly determined by one's economic condition. She contends that the main reason for the backwardness of Assamese Muslim women is the lack of proper interpretation of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. The general consensus, however, is that although the *Quran* is comparatively liberal regarding women's rights, it accords them a junior status, and in the present context there is need of an ideology above religion to fight the cause of all women irrespective of caste or creed identity.

In the urban areas quite a good number of educated women are employed in different jobs. The various problems faced by a working woman in Assamese society in all fields right from the family to the working institution are discussed by Dr. (Ms.) Deepali Barua in her paper "Social Status of Working Women in Assamese Society". Dr. Barua states that economic prosperity alone is not enough to counteract inequality between men and women in different fields and that despite her economic independence, a working woman is not getting her due position and respect in the society, but on the other hand, her achievement and movements, particularly if she is single or unmarried, are looked with suspicion by the society.

Although the Indian Constitution has granted equal rights and opportunities to all Indian citizens irrespective of one's caste, creed or sex, the proper social environment for enjoying the fruits of these rights by women has not yet emerged. In

actual practice, women are deprived of constitutional rights and privileges and made victims of various forms of social injustice. The legal status of Indian women through the ages and the various problems standing on the way of women's enjoyment of constitutional rights and opportunities in the context of Assam are discussed by Ms. Rita Choudhury y Thakuria in her paper "Legal Status of Women in the Non-Tribal Societies of Assam"

Institutionalised religion since its emergence has been playing a very important role in degrading women both in the family and the society. Dr. (Ms.) Aparna Mahanta in her paper "Women, Religion and Science in the Non-Tribal Society of Assam", discusses the role of religion particularly of Sankaradeva's *eka-sarana-nama-dharmaon* the non-tribal women of Assam. She contends that Vaisnavism as propounded by Sankaradeva had both positive and negative aspects. Positively it paved the way for the building up of a wider society breaking the narrow boundaries of tribal exclusivity, where women too got a scope to reach beyond the narrow boundaries of household duties towards a higher concept of life. Negatively Vainavism with its strong patriarchal base introduced a stratified social system. In this set up women were compelled to accept their inferior position as a *sudra*. She submitted that 'with the growth of institutionalised religion under the leadership of men, the status of women got lowered and their concept of science in the form of do's and don'ts were perverted to consider fertility as a curse and the concept of pollution was carried to the extent of depriving her admission to prominent prayer halls like that of Barpeta'. She contended that it is not religious equality which will free women and men from the bondage of religious obscuratism, what is needed for it is broadening of the horizon of work, education and science. Mr. S. Sengupta in his paper "The Status of Assamese Women in Religion" discusses the problem in the general Indian context and describes, citing references from the religious texts, how the ancient social system exploited and tortured women in the name of religion. He states that the non-tribal society of Assam was largely moulded by the codes of Hindu law givers who considered women as source of all evils and therefore assigned to her an inferior position in the society.

More than eighty per cent of our population live in the rural areas with agriculture as their main occupation, in which women play a major part. Weaving is still a common occupation among our village women, so also husbandry, poultry, fishing etc. In the paper "Economic Status of Women in Rural Areas of Assam", Dr.(Ms.) Anuva Saikia analysis the various factors influencing economic status of women like socio-economic and cultural, demographic features, stages of economic development in a society, educational level, etc. She pointed out that the proportion of women workers in Assam is higher in agriculture than in any other sectors of industry and that in the secondary sector the percentage of females engaged in household industry is the highest in Assam among the major states of India. She opines that any programme for uplift of rural women must aim at raising the levels of employment and income. She suggests that this can be done firstly by raising the efficiency of rural women through education and training, and secondly by creating employment opportunities in different sectors most suitable to the rural women. The impact of development activities on the role and status of rural women in the pre-independence period is evaluated by Dr. P.D. Saikia in his paper "Economic and Social Status of Rural Women (Non-Tribal) in Assam — A case study". From his field study of two villages in the district of Sibsagar, he comes to the conclusion that as a result of the spread of education, equality of status in most spheres of family and community life is observed. But women are lagging behind men in employment in salaried jobs and the manual work-load is very heavy for women, especially for those of the lower income-group. His study also indicates that scope for expression of creative activities for women is utterly lacking in the rural areas and men pay very little attention to it.

Alongside, a large number of women work in the tea-gardens of Assam. Most of them are illiterate and backward. In the paper captioned "Status of Labour Women in the Tea Gardens of Assam", Dr.(Ms.) Minoti Phukan submits that women labourers in the tea-gardens of Assam are discriminated not only in respect of wage payment but also in the provision of basic amenities of life. She states that labour women are not conscious of their rights and privileges because of their prevailing mass illiteracy and lack of contact with the outside world.

Indian women consumers play a key-role as earning and spending member of the family. In the study of "Buying Habits and Practices of the women Consumers of Assam", the author, Dr.(Ms.) M. Pathak and Ms. N. Barthakur contend that women's voice is often the deciding factor for purchase, but due to lack of consumer education, absence of organised resistance and such other reasons, women are not competent for the role of 'sovereignty'.

In the paper "Women is Administration and Politics in Medieval Assam", Ms. Bibha Boruah discusses, in the main, the direct and indirect roles played by women of the said period under the rule of the Ahoms, Kacharis and Koches. She also takes note of the common women's awareness of political events of the time and their role in militant struggles like the Moamariya rebellion.

Dr.(Ms.) Dipti Sharma in her paper, "The Women of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Freedom Struggle (1921-47)", present a brief but lively account of the problem. She points out that Mungri alias Malatimen, belonging to the tea-garden labour community of Lalmati Tea Estate near Tezpur was the first woman from Assam to sacrifice her life in the alter of the mother-land in course of the temperance movement in 1921. She submits that at least thirteen women of the Brahmaputra Valley laid down their lives in 1942 movement and many suffered serious injuries but it is a matter of regret that their sacrifice and sufferings have not received due recognition.

Political status of women, meaning their representation in politics, throughout the world is very poor. Taking the problem in the context of the main theme of the seminar. Dr.(Ms.) N.L. Dutta, in her paper captioned "Political Status of Women in Assam since Independence", gives an account of the participation of the women in the political processes as voters and candidates in various elections of Assam during the period 1952-1985. Analysing the reasons for poor representation of women in the State Legislature and the Parliament, she is of opinion that women's organisations of Assam are not strong enough to fight political battles. Besides, politics has become so nasty and corrupt that women hesitate to enter the world.

So far as the question of health is concerned, women and the baby-girls get little attention from their families. Not to

speak of the remote areas, even in advanced cities and families, women do not always get proper care or have necessary knowledge on this subject. Dr.(Ms.) Vijoylakshmi Pathak emphasises on the point that to foresee 'healthy and complete women it is of prime importance to rear the baby girls with utmost care' but because of social and religious taboo still prevalent in the society, the baby girls are deprived of many needs and care. Even the pregnant women suffer the same fate. She submits that promotion of re-productive health should be given top priority and nutritional health, immunisation, family planning services etc. extended by the government should be properly implemented.

Speaking on the same problem, Dr. Pramananda Mahanta points out that as because we do not have any national health policy, most of our women have to find their own resources to bear the extra responsibilities as producer and sustainer of life. Moreover, the status of women in our society being low, they remain a neglected section whether in education, food or health. Dr. Mahanta submits that female mortality in India is higher during infancy, childhood and reproductive age group and one of the major factors for high female death rate is maternal mortality, all of which points to a very low health status of women. He emphasises on the need of spread general awareness about health and education, about pregnancy and its problem, and to make medical care accessible all. He concludes that for realisation of this, some kind of peoples' health movement will have to be organised.

It is fact that the status of non-tribal women in Assam can not be looked upon in isolation, because it is integrally connected with that of the plains tribal, in particular, and all sections of women in general. From the contents of the papers, it can be concluded that socio-religious taboos still constitute so strong a handle on the way to women's progress that even the educated section of them do not come forward to fight the deprivations or discriminations for fear of having had to face condemnation or social ostracism. Economic independence is of utmost necessity to improve the status of women. Employment opportunities in different sectors should be created particularly for rural women. But economic independence alone is not enough. The general attitude of our society of looking upon women as somewhat inferior to men

must be changed. Women's house-hold work must be given due recognition and evaluated in any survey of economic activities. Equal pay for equal work, control of women over their own income and property are very essential for any change of the present situation. There should be wide and effective expansion and implementation of educational and developmental programmes to make women aware of their rights and potentialities and to bring the urban and the rural women close to one another to fight their common problems. It is women, who in the main, will have to fight their problems. Women's liberation movement is not isolated from the general movement for progress, peace and prosperity, but since women from a neglected section, they need special attention and help from the concerned authorities and the Government.

All the contributors of this work are, however, not trained researchers. The strict norms of methodology for writing research papers specially in citing references or foot-noted could not therefore be maintained in all cases. Hope the learned readers will condone this relaxation for promoting women's studies in an initial stage. Opinions and facts presented in the papers are the authors' own and the editor has not made any modification in them.

I take this opportunity to offer my thanks to Dr. P.S. Dutta, Deputy Director of the NERC Shillong of the ICSSR, New Delhi, for holding the seminar and for taking the initiative to get its proceedings published. I am also thankful to our University Authority for partially sponsoring the seminar. Members of the Professional Women's Forum, Dibrugarh University, particularly its General Secretary, Dr.(Ms.) Aparna Mahanta helped me in manifold ways to make the seminar a success and to get the papers ready for publication. I am grateful to all of them.

Last but not least, I thank Mr. R. Kumar of Omsons Publications, for publishing the proceedings of the Seminar.

Dr. (Ms.) S. L. Baruah
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