

SINGLE WOMEN IN ASSAMESE HINDU SOCIETY

JEUTI BAROOAH

Foreword by
Ananda C. Bhagabati



GYAN PUBLISHING HOUSE

NEW DELHI-110 002

Grew

F232
133

NE
301.4120954162
BAR;1

MEMO LIBRARY
Acc. No. 165123
Acc. by [initials]
Date 25/9/94
Class by [signature]
Subscribed by [signature]
Total by [signature]

DEDICATED
TO THE DEPARTED SOUL
OF MY HUSBAND

ISBN : 81-212-0416-X

© 1993 Jeuti Barooah

Published in 1993 by
Gyan Publishing House
5, Ansari Road
New Delhi - 110002

All right reserved. No part of this book may be
reproduced in any manner without written permission

Composed by Computer Bureau B-3, Arjun Nagar, Delhi 110051, and
printed at Goyal Offset Works, Delhi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the very outset I express my sincere and deep sense of gratitude to Dr Annada Charan Bhagabati, Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, under whose guidance and supervision I carried out my doctoral research. I am deeply indebted to him for his encouragement, keen interest and help without which it would have been difficult for me to complete the work.

I am grateful to Sjt. J.N. Das, IAS (Rtd.), Ex-Vice-Chancellor of Dibrugarh University and Ex-Director of Law Research Institute, Gauhati High Court, who extended valuable advice and help in the course of my work.

I express my grateful thanks to Sjt. B.P. Saikia, Registrar (Admn.) and Secretary, Law Research Institute, Gauhati High Court, for his valuable help and co-operation.

I am thankful to the authorities of Dibrugarh University for kindly permitting me to pursue my research in its Department of Anthropology under the guidance of Professor A.C. Bhagabati, formerly Head of the Department of Anthropology at Dibrugarh University. My thanks are due to Dr. K.C. Mahanta, Head, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, and to all other teachers in the Department for their constant encouragement and numerous acts to help and co-operation.

I express my deep sense of gratitude to Professor (Mrs) P.B. Das of Gauhati University for her constant encouragement. I also express my grateful thanks to Dr. I. Ali, Gauhati University, for his valuable help and suggestions in preparing the thesis.

The main substance of the thesis has been provided by all those single women who spared their time to narrate their life-stories honestly and frankly. To all of them, who I cannot acknowledge by name, I am deeply grateful. Without their warm co-operation this study would not have been possible.

My sincere thanks and indebtedness are due to Sarbashri Dr S.K. Baruah, Department of Census, Dr Anil Bharali, Dr Javed Ali, Dulan Bardoloi, M.Com., L.L.B., Udayan Hazarika, A.C.S. and Gauri Regon, A.C.S., for their invaluable help in various stages of my work.

I am grateful to Sri A.P. Swami for the pains he took in going through the manuscript. My sincere thanks are due to Smt. Jolly Bharali for her elegant typing of the manuscript and to Sri N.K. Choudhury for preparing the figures.

I owe a deep sense of gratitude to my brother-in-law Sjt. Bhuban Baruah, Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, for his help and encouragement in completion of the work. I am deeply indebted to my mother for her unstinting support and encouragement during the period of my study. I must also place on record my deep appreciation of my young and only son Jyoti-Tapan for his willing and voluntary denial of motherly attention for months together and for actively helping me in many ways.

I would like to thankfully acknowledge the help received from the staff of M/s Das Photostat. I am specially thankful to Sri S.N. Barkataki for his careful typing of the thesis.

I have taken due care to prepare the manuscript as correctly as possible. Despite my best efforts, many errors are likely to remain. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for all errors of omission and commission.

Jeuti Barooah

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	(vii)
<i>Foreword</i>	(xi)

PART ONE : GENERAL

1.	INTRODUCTION	3-21
2.	ASSAMESE SOCIETY AND WOMEN : AN OUTLINE	22-54
3.	GUWAHATI : THE SETTING	55-65

PART TWO : PROFILES OF THE SINGLE WOMEN

4.	SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE SINGLE WOMEN	69-77
5.	SINGLE STATUS THROUGH WIDOWHOOD	78-89
6.	SINGLE STATUS THROUGH BROKEN MARRIAGE	90-113
7.	THE UNMARRIED AS SINGLE WOMEN	114-128

PART THREE : SOCIAL HORIZON OF THE SINGLE WOMEN

8.	LIVING ARRANGEMENTS	131-148
9.	THE WORK SITUATION	149-163
10.	SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS	164-185

11.	SINGLE WOMEN AND LEGAL PROVISIONS	186-193
12.	CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS	194-204
	<i>Appendices</i>	205-216
	<i>Glossary</i>	217-219
	<i>References</i>	220-224
	<i>Index</i>	225-229
	<i>Maps and Figures</i>	230

FOREWORD

This book is the outcome of the author's passionate commitment to a subject of investigation dear to her heart. Dr. Barooah had been in the pursuit of authentic information, within the accepted framework of objective social anthropological and sociological field research, through the better part of 1980s on the emerging position, problems and status of 'single women' in contemporary Assamese Hindu Society. I should know all this, for I happened to be her tutor when she prepared the material for her doctoral thesis which was accepted by Dibrugarh University in 1990. I remember quite vividly how on numerous occasions the author, as a field researcher, got involved in the various issues that she raises and discusses in the book taking an activist position and I had to argue her back on the role of a 'dispassionate' social researcher!

The book, resulting out of the thesis, presents singularly relevant information, a point of view and a model for social research that are of importance not merely to the Assam region but India as a whole. She deals with an important segment of women in India whose number is on the rise, here in Assam and elsewhere, and it is high time we understand their special problems of adaptation to the changing society and coping with the demands of life. As I see it, this case study of Assam should have relevance in understanding the life situations of single women elsewhere in India.

The women who for one reason or another never enter into wedlock; women who are widowed young or in the prime of their life with crushing responsibilities of surviving and often raising children on their own in an alien urban world; and the women who are estranged or divorced from their husbands together constitute the author's universe of 'single women'. While as single women they all share certain common problems and difficulties, each subcategory also has certain distinctive characteristics and problems of adaptation. All these aspects have been competently dealt with, with copious support of field data by the author. I find the author's style of narration and insertion of case material as illustration to a generalizations or observation absorbing. The book is a very readable account which leaves one a little disturbed and

even a little provoked to take up a social activist position, like the author herself.

I leave it to the readers to explore for themselves these qualities of Dr. Barooah's work.

Professor and Director
Institute of Social Change and
Development
Guwahati

Dr. Ananda C. Bhagabati

PART ONE
GENERAL

1

INTRODUCTION

The background

In India, the age-old traditions of the Hindus have determined a distinct status for the women. The status relates to the image of the woman — pious and devout, married away early in life, loyal and obedient to the husband and devoted to the service of the family and the rearing of the children. The *Smriti* authorities extensively quote the old doctrine of perpetual subjection of women and their life long tutelage under their male relatives at successive stages of their lives. Kapadia (1988 : 142), while discussing the classical notions of marriage age, refers to the Hindu concept in the following way : "Woman is not fit to be independent. At early stage in her life she should be under the dominion of someone, her father, her husband or son. The idea of marriage was the transference of the father's dominion over her in favour of her husband."

This aspect is also highlighted by Singh (1980 : 62) : "Because of the *dependency assumption*, i.e., that a woman is dependent on a man throughout her life (father, husband, son), data derived from household surveys frequently assume that a woman is only household head or primary earner if there is no adult male in the household. "In the Indian society, women are generally considered secondary earners, and therefore, their contribution to the

household economy, even if substantial, is regarded as supplementary. Her traditional status is also visualized as one of subservience to menfolk who constitute the dominant segment of society.

In Assam too, a similar image obtains with regard to the traditional role and status of Hindu women. Even today elderly rural Assamese women are heard to say: "Formely I was under the control of my father, next I came to be ruled by my husband, and now it is the turn of my (grown up) son to rule over me."

Assamese society, by tradition, is a rural society. In demographic terms also it has been consistently rural and continues to be so¹. It is characterised by powerful sentiments of kinship, locality, caste and community. Social relations in such society are remarkably firm and stable. In the traditional rural Assamese society, despite a subservient status, the Hindu women of various castes suffered less from social disabilities than her counterparts in some other regions of India. Nevertheless, lack of opportunities for education, coupled with marriage at an early age, acted as a barrier to their progress till a few decades ago.

During the last few decades following Independence, the social situation in Assam has altered significantly due to various forces of modernization. The resultant changes in society have also impinged on the conditions of life of the womenfolk. Urbanization implies greater opportunities for education and economic independence for the women. Both in the rural and in the urban areas of Assam, there is a rise in the level of literacy among the women².

It may be assumed that due to the impact of education, the tenor of Assamese society has become more liberal, less rigid and less conforming to the traditional feminine ethos. Women are earning and the feminine segment as a whole is becoming more

¹In 1971 the urban population of Assam was only 8.87% of the total population distributed over 72 towns and the single declared city of Guwahati. No census was undertaken in Assam in 1981.

²The rising literacy rate of female population during the decade 1961-1971, in Assam, is given below :

	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
1961	13.8	47.0
1971	16.5	50.9

independent. Nevertheless, the age-old attitudes and mores create many disadvantages for the present day womenfolk.

Though emancipation of the Indian women and solution of their problems have engaged the attention of social thinkers and reformers for a long time past, these are yet to be resolved satisfactorily. The problem is even more acute in Assam where serious thinking and action programmes are less evident than in other parts of India.

Related studies on women

There are a number of studies made by social scientists on the problems of women in contemporary India. A few such studies are discussed here :

A.S. Altekar, in his book *The position of women in Hindu civilization* (1959), has dealt with Indian women from the prehistoric times down to the present day. He deals with the general lines on which the various problems that confront Hindu women should be tackled in order to get a fairly satisfactory solution. The author reviews the long history to make a comparative estimate of the achievements and limitations of Hindu civilization regarding the women and her problems.

Indian women today by Khanna and Varghese (1978) is an effort to study Indian women in all their aspects. This authoritative study is based on one thousand case-studies of Indian women from different socio-economic levels and regions. In the social structure of modern India, where the woman of today stands, how much has she changed in the last three decades, what is her psychological attitude to change — these are some of the questions dealt with in the study.

In another study, *India's educated women*, Blumberg and Dwaraki (1980) presented their findings on the urban educated women of Bangalore. The authors have expressed their views that women who try to meet the traditional obligations of Indian wife and mother and also spend many hours away from home in paid employment are experiencing a 'role overload' or a 'double day'. They say that education and employment are the mechanisms which lead the women to larger freedom and greater equality.

Women in contemporary India and South Asia, edited by Alfred de Souza (1980) is a collection of empirical studies on the interac-

tion between traditional images of women and their new roles in the changing society. It offers a fresh perspective on women and factors affecting their changing roles in the socio-cultural milieu.

Inderjeet Kaur (1983) has analysed her findings in *Status of Hindu women in India* to show how the Hindu women are still quite traditional in their outlook. Studying the changing value orientation of Hindu women of urban middle-class families in eastern U.P., the author opines that they have a highly selective attitudes towards tradition and modernity.

In addition to the above, *Towards Equality*, the Report of the Committee on the Status of women in India (1975); covers a wide perspective, including all the important aspects affecting the life of women.

There are some more studies that could be cited here, e.g., Hate (1969), Kapur (1970, 1974, 1978), Jain (1975), Mehta (1975), Devi (1982), Rao (1983), Kaushik (1985), Pothan (1987). Many of these works were published during the International Women's Year (U.N.O.) 1975 and after. These publications focus upon the diverse and emergent problems of women in the rapidly changing social and economic situations of our country. Such studies fill up a much needed gap in our knowledge as to what is happening in the sphere of women's status in contemporary India and their adjustment to the demands of modern life.

These studies, however, do not deal with the problems of single women as a specific category. The problems of Assamese single women have not been studied empirically by anyone. The problems of single women are in many ways unique. These have to be properly understood. Often neglected in life and neglected by society, they languish in a tragic corner in which light needs to be thrown. It is felt that there is a genuine need for studying the situation obtaining among this category of women.

The Problem

i. The Scope :

As elsewhere in the country, the social situation in Assam, too, has undergone significant changes in the decades following Independence due to various factors and forces. In broad terms, the change-inducing influences may be traced to diverse policies and programmes of Government and other agencies as well as to

Introduction

urban-industrial growth. The pace of change in Assam has been relatively slow in comparison with other parts of India. Yet, the regional society today is no longer a wholly kinship-based rural society guided by principles of caste, community and local organizations. In the urban areas joint family living is fading out and the nuclear family values have enhanced the position of women giving them greater freedom than ever before.

In the last decades, there has been an explosive growth of education even in the rural areas of Assam. Migration from rural areas to towns has increased in volume. For women, there is not merely a rise in the level of literacy and education but also an upward swing of the age of marriage (see Table 7).

In sum, the traditional stagnancy of the Assamese rural society and its cohesiveness have both been significantly undermined by the external factors and forces of change.

When the social situation is altered, it is but natural to expect that the role and status of women will also reflect the change. Thus, while lack of education and rigidity of social structure would not permit any widow, divorcee or unmarried women to exist as independent entities outside particular kingroups in the rural society, in the modern urban context it is not unusual for such a category to emerge. This is because urbanized women are increasingly coming out of the orbits of the tradition-ridden families. In the urban milieu, education, delayed marriage and occupational opportunities, all of which reflect social change, pave the way for the emergence of 'single woman' as a definable component of the women's world.

It is important to mention that in the last few years, single women, as a discrete and important category has been perceived and identified by even the popular press. For instance, a Bengal fortnightly, called *Sananda* (specially meant for women readership) published a cover article in its 10th September issue of 1987, entitled, *Ekok Nari* (literally, 'single woman'). In this too, single woman has been defined to cover the three categories, namely, widow, divorcee and unmarried.

The researcher has chosen this section of the Assamese women for the following reasons : Married women who form part and parcel of a stable social unit, such as a family or a kingroup, do not have to seek special avenues of adjustment and orientation on

individual terms. On the other hand, single women are confronted with problems which are new to Assamese womenfolk. These problems relate to new roles, new types of status adjustment and acceptance of as well as integration in a changing society. For example, an unmarried woman has one type of role in the traditional joint family in a rural community but a different one in the urban setting, particularly when she is an educated woman. Higher education may have the effect of limiting marital choice for a woman since it is considered imperative that the husband should have at least equal, and preferably higher education than his wife.

The life of a young widow with or without dependent children has also many emergent problems. It was one type of role in the traditional Hindu society, but it has become quite different in the emergent urban milieu. Likewise, the category of divorced single women is a product of the emergent social order. These single women who were born during the last thirty years or so, have greater potentiality for realising their aspirations when compared with the women of earlier generation. They constitute a segment which has been trying to achieve adjustment to the demands of changing socio-economic and cultural circumstances on individual terms.

ii. *Objectives of the study :*

An attempt has been made here to study and analyse the social situation obtaining among a cross-section of single women. The object of the study is to ascertain the emerging status of single women and to examine how far they have been integrated in the modern Assamese society and what are the unique elements and problems of each category of single women. To be more specific, what sort of change has come about in the life of single women in the new social context? In what way have they resolved their economic problems? What is their role and performance as working women? What are the character and extent of change in their informal social relations? What are the quality and method of adjustment to overcome their diverse problems? What is the pattern of acceptance of single women in the social milieu? Where do today's single women stand in the structure of modern Assamese Hindu society? These are the aspects examined by the researcher. Another object of this study is to make a close examination of the current social legislations in respect of such women. Enacted legislations are out of reach of a common Assamese woman as she

Introduction

lacks the necessary awareness, opportunities and financial resources. The question as to how far the legislations have ensured their security in society or have helped them to improve their socio-economic condition is one of the main points examined in this study.

iii. *Hypotheses :*

1. Urbanization has produced, among other things, a two-fold impact on the womenfolk of Assam :

(a) It has provided new opportunities for education and employment to women, and,

(b) It has aided the break-up of the joint family system and the weakening of the kinship organization wherein lay the traditional security of women.

2. Consequential effects of the above-mentioned developments have not been the same for all segments of Assamese women. These impacts have contributed to the emergence of the new phenomenon of 'single women'. But while on the one hand, educational and occupational opportunities have provided enhanced economic independence to women, increased their decision-making power and enabled them to judge the traditional customs and behaviour—the break-up of the joint family and the weakening of the kinship organization, on the other hand, have undermined traditional social security available to women, especially single women. Thus while the former effect is beneficial, the latter is not, not at least till alternative security is provided by society to single women.

3. In attempting to adjust themselves to this conflicting situation, the single women have stepped into a somewhat diffuse transitional stage. On the one hand, they have been forced by circumstances to seize the newly opened opportunities for education and employment and, on the other, they have not yet been able to extricate themselves completely from the kinship traditions which still provide, though loosely, some sort of security to them.

Thus they constitute a separate category or 'class'. They have to create a social world of their own and seek friendship and understanding from other single women.

The transitional stage in which a section of Assamese women find themselves provides the framework for this study. The basic premise of the study is presented in a schematic manner in Fig. 1.

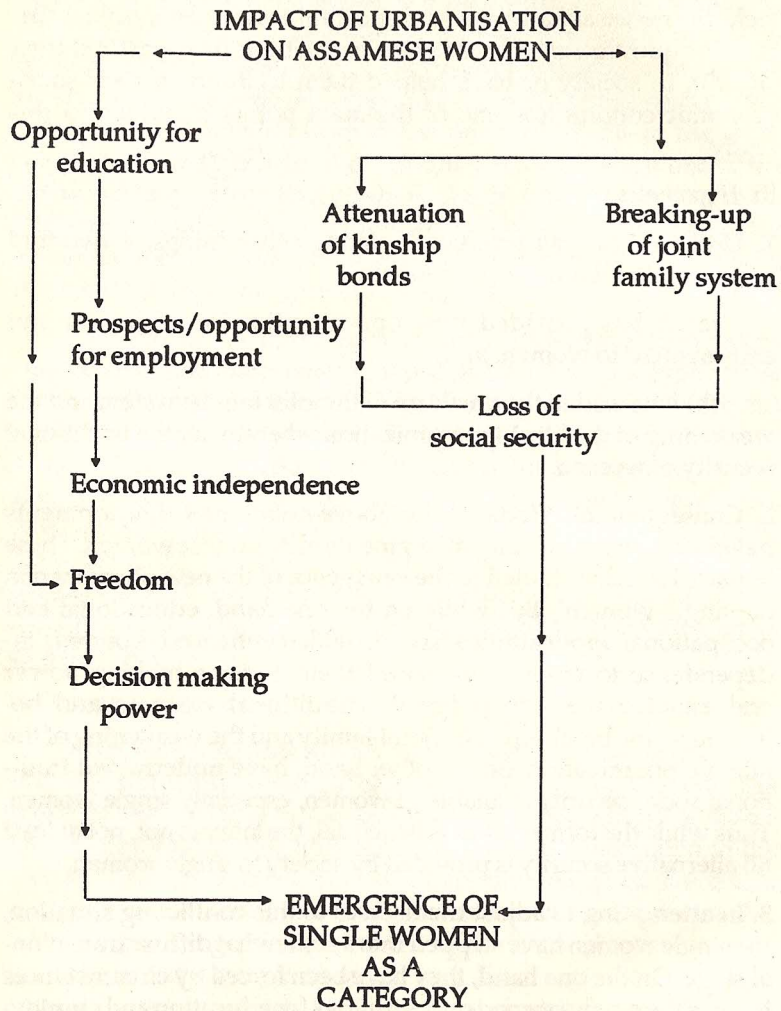


Fig. 1. The premise of the study.

iv. The field setting and the universe of study:

For a number of reasons elaborated in Chapter III, the new phenomenon of single women has made its appearance more markedly in Guwahati than in any other place of Assam. The researcher thus felt that Guwahati as a venue would offer more opportunities to study this new phenomenon than any other area. Hence the choice of Guwahati as a setting for field investigations.

The chosen topic of study, 'single women in contemporary Assamese Hindu Society', was originally intended to cover all classes of single women. But actual operational problems in the field made it imperative to confine it to that class of single women who were also working women. This is not to imply that all single women are working women. It is certain that there are many single women who are not employed in any gainful occupations.³ But because of operational difficulties in the field they had to be excluded from the purview of the study.

Besides operational difficulties, there are also other reasons for confining the studying to the working section of the single women. For, it is work which provides the setting for consideration of the changing status, special problems of adjustment, arrangements for residence in unfamiliar surroundings, and so on.

Non-working single women are, by and large, a part and parcel of the traditional familial and kinship constellations. They are merged in the kinship system and, in the rural areas especially, subject to caste differences. In this study, though no direct and on-the-spot investigations have been made in the rural areas, yet data collected in the city from persons who have recently migrated from villages throw sufficient light on the problems faced by them in the villages.

In this study, the investigation has not been extended to the rural setting. Hence, there is no direct framework for comparison of rural and urban norms with regard to the status of single women.

Methodology

i. Study design:

It is necessary to mention that the study design is based on the assumption that single women are engaged in different types of economic activities. Keeping this basic consideration in mind, but having no secondary information to fall upon, a pilot survey was conducted at the initial stage in the various establishments of the city⁴.

³ A small number of such non-working women is represented by the inmates of Kasturba Ashram, State — Home and Destitute Home, who, however, belong to special categories.

Such establishments (as detailed in Appendix I) are of four different types :

1. Educational institutions, 2. Office establishments, 3. Banks and 4. Female occupational centres.

The educational institutions include Lower Primary schools, Middle English schools, High and Higher Secondary schools, College and University.

The office establishments include the offices of Central Government, State Government, Semi Government Institutions, Corporations and Boards.

Banks include the various branches of the State Bank of India and a few other banks located in the city.

Female occupational centres are those where service is rendered predominantly by females, such as, hospitals, nursing homes, weaving centres, hostels for working women and different welfare organisations for women.

The heads of such institutions were contracted personally as well as by correspondence by the researcher in order to have an idea of the universe of the single women engaged in these establishments. At first the purpose of the survey was explained clearly to the head of the organisation. He/she was then requested to fill up a schedule (Appendix II) giving names and information relating to the women employees. The completed schedules helped to identify the universe of study (as shown in Appendix I).

The result of this pilot survey shows that out of 125 different establishments, visited or otherwise contracted by the researcher,

⁴Names of such institutions were gathered from Telephone Directory, 1981; Administrative Directory No. 11 of the Government of Assam, and pay roll Register Books of the schools in the offices of D.I. and Inspector of Schools. In addition to this, discussions with various knowledgeable persons were held regarding institutions.*

* Personal knowledge of the researcher, who is a permanent resident of Guwahati, also facilitated the collection of names of such establishments. The list of such establishments where women, including single women, are employed in Guwahati is given in Appendix I.

as many as 105 had women employees. The pattern of female employment in these establishments will be evident from table 1.

Table 1
Women employees in the surveyed
establishments in Guwahati

Type of establishment	Total no. of establishment visited	Presence of women employee	Absence of women employee
1. Educational institutions	35	32	3
2. Office establishment	60	46	14
3. Banks	14	11	3
4. Hospitals and other female occupational centres	16	16	-
	125	105	20

After processing the schedules of these 105 establishments, it was found that 10 schedules were not properly filled up. So these were rejected and 95 schedules, correct in all respects, were taken up for further consideration. The results of this pilot survey are shown in table 2.

Table 2 shows the distribution of population (1701) according to their marital status in each category of establishment.

In the first category, made up of educational institutions, it is found that the number of female employees is highest (38.7 per cent). It indicates that teaching is usually preferred by women.

In the second category, the percentage of women employees is found to be slightly lower (34.2 per cent). In Assam, women, working in offices is a new phenomenon occurring mainly after Independence.

Banks constitute the third category of establishments visited by the researcher. Service in banks is an new trend among the working women of Assam. Because of relatively higher salary, secured life, prestige and future prospect, educated women now try to get into banking services by appearing in competitive ex-

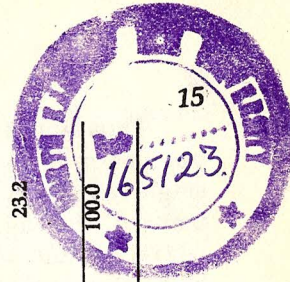
aminations. The percentage of women engaged in this sector is found to be 3.9 out of the total employees of 1701.

In the fourth and the last category of establishments, namely 'female occupational centres' (hospitals, nursing home, weaving centre, etc.), the percentage of women engaged is found to be 23.2.

Introduction

Table 2
Distribution of women employees according to marital status

Types of establishment	No. of establishment	Marital status of women employees				Percentage to total (1701)	
		Married	Unmarried	Widow	Divorced/ separated		
Educational	30	523	90	32	14	659	38.7
Official establishment	42	343	184	47	8	582	34.2
Banking	10	23	37	6	-	66	3.9
Female occupational centres	13	98	238	34	24	394	23.2
	95	987	549	119	46	1701	100.0
Percentage of total (1701)		58.0	32.3	7.0	2.7		



Thus table 2 shows a good number (1701) of working women population in the 95 institutions. However, all of them are not single women. A high percentage (58 per cent) of these women is married. Then again, the entire category of the unmarried women who constitute 32.3 per cent of the total also cannot be treated as having the single women status. More than half of these unmarried women are below the age of 30 years.⁵ Out of the total number (549) of unmarried women, 313 have not yet attained the age of 30 years. These unmarried young women have taken up jobs for various reasons. There is a tendency in them to marry at a higher age. It may be assumed that the unmarried young women below 30 years of age have the probability of marriage sooner or later. For the purpose of this study, therefore, women below 30 years have been excluded from the single women status as a measure of caution. In actual fact, however, a small percentage of them may remain unmarried and thus join the category of single women.

After deducting the number of married women and unmarried women below 30 years, the universe of the single women comes to contain 401 individuals. They constitute the focal universe of the investigation.

Table 3
Universe of the single women

Marital status	Number	Percentage to total (401)
Unmarried above 30 years	236	58.8
Widow	119	29.7
Divorced/ Separated	46	11.5
	401	100.0

Table 3 shows the break-up of this universe of 401 women according to marital status. Out of this universe of 401 single women, 236 (58.8 per cent) are unmarried women above 30 years. This figure also includes a few unwed mothers. Widows constitute

⁵ The age distribution of the wider universe made of 1701 working women of various marital status are outlined in Appendix III.

29.7 per cent of the focal universe. The somewhat smaller percentage (11.5) of divorced or separated women may partly be due to the fact that women of this category do not always want to disclose their status. The trend towards separation or divorce is a new phenomenon in the Assamese society and the women are found to be rather sensitive and reticent to admit this status.

ii. *Sample survey* :

After having arrived at the focal universe of 401 single women, the main sociographic study and qualitative data collection have been confined by 110 of these women. These 110 women represent a stratified sample representing the character of the focal universe in all respects. Stratification was made according to marital status, distribution in various jobs and socio-economic class background. The study was intended to be intensive covering all aspects of the lives of the sampled single women.

Table 4
Sample sizes of single women according to marital status.

Marital status	Number	Sample studied
Unmarried	236	40
Widow	119	40
Divorced/ Separated	46	30
	401	110

Table 4 shows the sample size of the focal universe. Of the 40 divorced/separated women as many as 30 (65.2 per cent) have been covered by the sample. The reason for including a higher proportion of women of this category is to study in greater depth the various causes leading to the dissolution of marriage and the manner of their adjustment to the demands of single life. Divorce or separation is a new phenomenon in the Assamese society and it deserves to be studied carefully in order to ascertain the causes and consequences of broken marriages. Hence, over and above these 30 cases 20 more cases were studied from the documentary evidence of the court registers, too.

The reason for taking a smaller sample of unmarried women is that even though they have all passed the age of 30 years, some of them may still get married at a later stage of life.

The proportion of widows in the sample is 33.6. This is considered large enough to give a true and representative picture of the actual situation.

The final sample of 110 women were interviewed in detail with structured schedules (Appendix IV). These schedules contain certain questions framed for the purpose of collecting basic sociographic data. But the interview was not limited to these questions only. All kinds of information bearing on the subject of study, besides answers to structured questions, were gathered during the interview duly recorded. Often enough valuable information were elicited from the women in the course of informal discussions.

iii. Data base :

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were generated through questionnaire and structured schedule surveys, interviews and discussions with single women respondents. In addition, useful informations were gathered from a variety of persons, social workers, heads of various employment agencies, government officials, educationists, and so on. Secondary data consist of published and unpublished materials in the form of books, reports, journals and periodicals of historical, demographic and sociological nature. Women — specific studies were especially consulted to develop necessary insights and to provide comparative material.

Prolonged unstructures and informal interviews with single women in the sample enabled the collection of detailed cases. A schedule (Appendix II) was prepared in order to get sociographic and quantitative data on the universe. Two interview schedules (Appendix IV) were made for the respondents of the sample.

The study covers certain aspects which directly impinge upon the personal lives of the respondents. Hence, participant observation method was also used at times for acquiring an in-depth perception of the life and behaviour of the respondents. This would not have been possible through conventional and formal interviews.

Secondary data were collected almost entirely from the libraries of Guwahati city including the Guwahati University Library, Guwahati District Library, Central Library, Guwahati High Court Judges' Library, Cotton College Library, Library of the Census department and the Dibrugarh University Library.

iv. Field work :

It will have been evident by now that this study does not provide a conventional setting for anthropological field work. The single women, though a clearly definable category, do not constitute a community in spatial or any other sense of the term. There is no sense of identity or common sentiment uniting them as a group. Though the sample population lives in Guwahati, most of them do not know each other and they are not organized for common action as a group. All these 'negative' traits of the population under investigation made field work a somewhat unorthodox and difficult proposition for the researcher. Except for inmates of women's Homes, there was little scope or prolonged personal observation and informal contact and communication of the researcher with the women. Hence, with every single woman who furnished information, the researcher had to establish personal contact, rapport and communication links. With most of the informants, an interview situation was the first and sometimes the only method of data collection. From this point of view, the method of data collection was more sociological than anthropological.

Field work involved considerable movement to different parts of the city and getting involved in numerous interview type discussions with concerned women respondents. However, to the great satisfaction of the researcher. It was possible to win the confidence and friendship of many of these women, so that information came forth readily once they understood the academic and welfare orientation implicit in the study. The status of the researcher as a single woman herself, belonging to the same Hindu Assamese social universe, greatly helped in winning the confidence and friendship of the respondents as well as establishing the empathy, so necessary for probing into sensitive, personal and emotional arenas of life of the respondents.

The study necessitated collection of detailed case history of single women. But biographical details are always sensitive matters and could not be gathered in an off-hand manner in the very first meeting with a respondent. Therefore, in reality, an interview technique had to be developed during the course of the field work. Interviews could be successful when the purpose of interviewing the respondents was clearly explained. To gain authentic information it was explained to everyone of them that the researcher

wanted to know the details of life of single women as a basis for general understanding of their problems of adjustment in society. It was also assured to them that the information disclosed to her would be kept strictly confidential and used only for research purpose without name and identification of the informant being made public. They helped the researcher honestly and sincerely by giving all the required information. Some women were highly articulate but others gave brief answers and appeared to be reticent. They did not like to reveal their personal life-history. Their hesitation was a great hurdle to the researcher. To overcome such difficulties, the researcher tried to make the interview situation as informal as possible. The quality of the interviews varied according to the temperament of the respondent. The questions were of the 'open-ended' variety and were asked in such a manner that they had to be answered in several sentences. Sometimes it took a minimum of two to three hours to complete an interview. Sometimes, depending upon the mood of the women, it required two or even three visits to complete the task. An effort was made to establish fruitful friendship and rapport between the particular respondent and the researcher. It was realised that the sincere and friendly visit of the researcher to their places was a great relief to some of the respondents.

The place of interview was fixed by according to the desire and convenience of the respondents and the presence of any third person was excluded as far as possible. The setting for interviews and discussions varied from home to hostel to a suitable corner of office where a respondent worked. Except for certain basic facts, no recording was done at the time of the interview. Note making in the course of an interview seemed to impede the flow of conversation and disturb the informal atmosphere. Immediately after the interview, every detail was noted down meticulously. All the answers regarding various aspects of her life were recorded as narrated by the respondents.

The field work for this study formally began in November, 1981 and was carried up to around 1985. The basic field data generation took place during the period of 1982-1983.

Tabulation and Interpretation

After completing the field work, the data were processed and tabulated according to the requirements of the various aspects of the study.

The whole process of collection, serialisation and compilation of data was designed as carefully as possible. An amount of flexibility was retained in the design so that, in case of necessity, steps could be taken to modify the presentation of the material. The plan of presentation that finally emerged and the way of information has been embodied in the thesis is outlined below :

Plan of presentation

The findings of the study have been arranged under three parts. The first part, divided into three chapters, is concerned with the general background of the study. Chapter I sets forth the problems and methodology on the background of studies on women undertaken elsewhere in India. Chapter II provides an outline of the Assamese society with particular reference to women. The chapter also deals with the plural sociocultural context of Assam and its caste-based Hindu society in the Brahmaputra valley. Chapter III deals with the research setting, namely, Guwahati.

Part Two, comprising four chapters, is devoted to the profiles of the three categories of single women, namely, the widows, the divorced or separated women and the unmarried women. Chapter IV examines the social background of the respondents covered by the study. Chapters V, VI and VII delineate the ways in which the women acquire single status. Since the data relate to purely personal life and experience of the women, their names have been altered in the case studies to preserve their anonymity.

Part Three reviews the social horizon of the single women under five chapters. Chapter VIII examines the patterns of accommodation and living arrangement of the single women. Chapter IX is devoted to the analysis of the work situation of the single women. Chapter X provides an analysis of social and cultural contexts of the single women in contemporary Assamese Hindu society. An attempt has been made here to study the changing life of the single women from tradition to modernity. The chapter discusses the patterns of family, household and kinship of the single women and their life in relation to religion, recreation and other aspects. Chapter IX examines the position of single women in Assamese society under the provision of enacted legislations, relating specially to marriage, maintenance and succession. Chapter XII summarises the main findings by way of concluding observations and offers some suggestions regarding future course of action.

The book focuses attention on the single women in Assamese Hindu Society.

While lack of education and rigidity of social structure would not permit any widow, divorcee or unmarried woman to exist as independent entities outside particular kin groups in the rural society, in the modern urban context it is not unusual for such a category to emerge. In the urban milieu, education, delayed marriage and occupational opportunities, all of which reflect social change, pave the way for the emergence of 'single women' as a definable component of the women's world. They constitute a segment which has been trying to achieve adjustment to the demands of changing socio-economic and cultural circumstances on individual terms.

This study is perhaps the first scholarly attempt to scientifically explore and analyze the life history and problems of single women. The findings of the study have been arranged under three parts with twelve different chapters. The first part, divided into three chapters, is concerned with the general background of the study. Part two, comprising four chapters, is devoted to the profiles of the single women. This part has analyzed cases of single women to depict how they are pushed into single status. Part three reviews the social horizon of the single women under five chapters which examines her patterns of living arrangement, work situation, social and cultural context and her position in

continued on next flap

Assamese society under the provision of enacted legislation. What makes the study more valuable is the author's efforts to give a deep insight into the matter coupled with some concluding observations and suggestions regarding future course of action.

Dr. Jeuti Barooah received her M.Sc. in Anthropology (Social) from Gauhati University. She completed L.L.B. from the same University and Ph.D. from Dibrugarh University.

Dr. Barooah started her career as Associate Editor in *Assamese Encyclopaedia*, Publication Board, Assam, and at present working as the Research Officer at the Law Research Institute, Eastern Region, Gauhati High Court, Guwahati.

An active researcher Dr. Barooah's field of study includes the customary laws, land laws, administration of justice, etc. in the North Eastern region of India. She regularly writes for journals and newspapers besides contributing seminar papers in her concerning fields.