

Research Papers



## Feminism in Assam

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### Abstract

*Assam like in other parts of India followed the law given by Manu. Manu established a patriarchal system and women were given a position of subordination and subjugation. Women were taught to be feminist and feminine woman do not want higher education, career and independence, Those who did were frowned upon by not only males but by their own sex as well. All they had to do was to devote their lives from early girlhood to find a husband and bearing children for him. There was no way she could even dream about herself except as her children's mother or her husband's wife. The women did not even have the freedom to choose their husbands. After their marriage they were advised on how to keep their husbands happy at home and it was generally considered their fault if the men turned elsewhere for their pleasure.*

She prepared his meal, reared his children and nursed his ill old parents and at the same time pleases his husband as a sexual object. Because of women's lack of economic rights, they were completely dependent on their husband. The vulnerability of women was not just from feminine weakness but also from their lack of economic independence. She was completely dependent on his protection in a world that was made by men for men. "A woman is defined only with respect to her husband. She loses her patronymic name after marriage. In the case of divorce, convention forbids the ex-spouse from keeping her husband's name. On the other hand, if he dies, she has to add widow to her name."<sup>1</sup>

In the days of Rig-Veda there was no system of child marriage among the Aryans. And that time the position of women was an improved one but in the day of Veda the position of women started to deteriorate. Gradually came into being the system of child marriage and turned it into a

custom. It was generally among the Brahmins that a girl should be married before reaching puberty otherwise it is a great sin for which the parents have to suffer. As a result of this sometimes a small girl child had to be married to a person of her father's age. It also happens that he dies after two or three years of the marriage and the small child had to lead her life as a widow following all the hard and fast rules of widowhood. There was no question of remarriage without a husband, a wife's life was supposed to be meaningless. The widow was blamed for her husband's death and if she happened to live after him she had to spend the rest of her life in complete self denial in everything. She had to wear coarse white cloth, walk bare foot and eat only one vegetarian meal a day and had to undergo several fasting. She was considered an ill omen and was shut out from all ceremonies and auspicious occasions. She had to be continually felt apologetic to be alive after her husband's death. There was no question of remarriage or starting a

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new life. They did not have the right to property. After the death of the father the property was divided among the sons, if there were no son, then the property would go their daughter. If there were more than one daughter, then the parents would bring up the eldest son of the eldest daughter, and after them the property would go in his home. Otherwise the property would go to the king or the state. After the death of her husband the widow had no right to claim the property of her husband.

The dowry system which we understand today was not prevalent in the ancient days. The aristocratic families used to give some gift to their daughter and son-in-law. Dowry system begins from the middle ages among the Rajput khastriyas. There is no mention of dowry system in the earlier days in Assam. Still today it a shame among the Assamese society to look after what has been brought by the bride.

During the Ahom period (1228-1838 AD), the society was divided into various ranks, and as such a classification affected the status of women. The princess and the women members of the royal and noble families and those of the high officials constituted a distinct class. They enjoyed a high status in public life. But the women belonging to lower classes naturally enjoyed a low status. "The upper class women of the Ahom period also look interest in politics. The queen mothers used to act as regents of their minor sons. The elderly women members of the royal families were quite often found to have taken part in discussions with state ministers on political matters. In the eighteenth century, the Atom administration was run consecutively by three queens, namely phuleswari allies pramatheswari (1714 AD, Ambika allies Madambika (1721 AD) and Sarveswari (1739 AD). All these queens of Sivasingha showed great ability in administration. A few Assamese brave women also fought battles with the enemy soldiers. Mulagabharu, an Ahom woman laid down her life fighting against the Mughals in 16th century<sup>2</sup>.

In the transitional period from the 18th to 19th century, the position of women deteriorated with the advent of the foreigners. The Mughal and the Burmese invasion came down as a curse on Assamese woman. The invaders showed disrespect to woman and committed crimes against them. During the Burmese invasions, the women were the worst victims. The tide of her good life ebbed, her freedom curtailed and she became the most suppressed section of an

exhausted and subservient people in the subsequence period. In such a state of insecurity, the Assamese Hindus preferred to give their daughter in marriage to an early age and at times to married persons of the same community to protect their daughters from being carried away by the invaders. But with the passage of time these measures turned into social customs like early marriage and polygamy. The contact with the Bengali culture in the 19th century after the advent of the British brought certain practices which were unknown in the pre-British Assamese women society. The purdah in the form of orani or veil, penetrated into the Assamese society during this period which further lowered the position of women.

Women education in general was not encouraged. A conservative attitude amongst a section of the social elites was primarily responsible for this. In a series of articles published in Assam Bandhu (1885-1886), the exposure of women to formal education was totally discouraged. Women's education was considered as a threat to the position of man in society. Some chauvinistic male propagated the idea that with education women would become more masculine in their nature and behavior to the detriment of the social order. In the article Tirotar Bone, (duties of women), published in another Assamese magazine the Mon (the bee) in 1886, the education of women was said to be were dangerous then the Burmese atrocities. The article said that the girls might be taught to read and write only at home by their own brothers or by women tutors. She should be given little knowledge of arithmetic so that she might be able to carry on the domestic chores<sup>3</sup>. Along with the advent of British also came the liberal ideas of the west, which encouraged our educated men to come forward and make efforts at improving the condition of women with noticeable success. Notable among them were Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Gonga gobinda Phukan, Hemchandre Baruah etc.

When we talk of women's movement in Assam we cannot proceed, without citing the contribution of Christian Missionary in awakening the women of Assam. In 1836 Dr. Nathan brown and Oliver Cutter of America came to Assam for the propagation of Christianity. "They first set their foot in Sadiya. Within few days, they learnt Assamese Khamti and Sifing language and started their mission. The missionary women were the first to establish girls School. In 1837 Mrs Cutters opened a girl primary school at Sadiya. In 1840 at

sibsagar by Mrs. Brown and in 1843 at Nagaon by Mrs Bronson, girls school were established” 4. Through the Newspapers 'Arunodoi' articles were written on women education to inspire them. Eliza Brown along with writing articles in Arundoi wrote books on geography and mathematics for the students. At the initial stage missionary had to struggle to collect students. No one was ready to send their children to study under a Christian. Therefore they picked up the orphan and homeless child and started to teach them. From 1873 again started the use of Assamese language in schools and courts. Slowly there started a new awakening in Assam. And along with the Missionaries, Mr. Brown and Mrs Brownson, Guniviram Baruah, Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan Hemchandra Baruah etc. started to work for the development of Assamese language literature and social system. Through 'Arunodoi' the Assamese people became aware about the happenings in the other parts of the world and helped them to awake themselves.

Like in other parts of India, in Assam too, the reform movement of the women was led by the men. The movement laid more emphasis on girls' education as the society was totally against girls' education. It was Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1959) who was the pathfinder of women's movement in Assam. As at that time there was no institution for girls education, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan taught his wife at home and his daughter Padmabati was well educated. Padmabati was married to Nandeswar Baruah, from Brahmin family whose family was outcasted after his marriage to a family supporting English education. After Anandram Dhekil Phukan, Hemachandra Baruah (1835-1896) and Guniviram Baruah (1837-1894) followed his footsteps.” They went against the orthodox beliefs of the society in the name of religion and wanted to improve the condition of women. They themselves took practical steps in it. Guniviram Baruah was in favor of widow remarriage. In fact he was the first person to marry a widow in 1870. “After his remarriage he had to undergo difficult situation as the society was totally against widow remarriage. Gunaviram along with Lakhinath Barkakati were the first to send their daughters Swarnalata and Sarada Devi to Calcutta to study in Bethun College.”<sup>5</sup> in 1880. After Swarnalata and Sarla Devi, Durgaprava Das, Hemprava Das Rajabala Das, Rajniprava Das and many more went to Calcutta for education. When they came back, they started to work for educational reforms in Assam. Hemachandra Baruah (1835-1896) was of the

view that husband and wife have same body, same life and therefore there is no difference between them. “The independence of remarriage which a husband have after the death of his wife, in the same way the wife should also have the independence of remarriage if necessary after the death of her husband” 6. Hemachandra Baruah did not remarry after the death of his wife citing the reason that if after my death, my wife cannot remarry then how can I. He says “I thought if it was my death and not my wife's then what would be her condition. She is dead, if I wish I can marry not only one but three of them. But after being widow if she would have only thought about her remarriage society would be outraged and her living would have been like a dead. How impossible it is, How unlawful! Therefore, my remarriage is not a right decision”<sup>7</sup>. [Gunaviram Baruah (1837-1894) in his drama 'Ram Nabami (1857) depicts the sorrow of a widow named Nabami who fell in love with Ram. Ram could not accept her against the orthodox beliefs of the society. Nabami who in her distress utters the following words “In the country where there is such scene, no man should be born. If they take birth they should not be women, and if women then no widow and if widow then not at the early stage of her life”<sup>8</sup>. Nabami could not tolerate this discrimination and so she commits suicide. It made a new awakening in the society and led the educated Assamese male to think about widow remarriage.

At a time when Assam was dominated by blind conservatism women generally remained confined to their homes, while their spouses were free to enjoy life without any hindrance. Protest was the word unknown to women. It was the days of feudal lordship marked by little concern for the welfare of the better half. At this period Chandraprava Saikaini (1901-1972) came out as a torch bearer in the lives of Assamese women. She was the first Assamese women to ignore a number of age old traditions which were not necessarily conducive to the promotion of women's liberty and dignity. In fact, in Assam she was the fore runner of the women's liberation movement. Chandraprava was a strong willed woman, who firmly believed that every human being male or female has equal right to enjoy all the facilities available. She along with her sister Rajaniprova went to the boys primary school for which they had to bear criticism. But with sincere effort and hard work they were able to develop tremendous mental strength. Rajaniprova became the first lady doctor



in Assam. On the other side Chandraprava was deeply impressed by the Mahatma's role in uplifting the weaker sections of society. She dedicated herself to uplift women and for the emergence of progressive Assamese society. She encouraged the Assamese society to take to spinning and weaving in their homes. She was responsible for obtaining the entry of the low caste people into the temple of Hayagriba Madhav at Hazo 30 km from Guwahati, thus opening a new chapter in Assam's social system. She wanted women to be free from the clutches of men. She wanted to stroke off the foundation of the patriarchal society. She even refused to retain the surname of either her father or her husband and assumed a fresh surname "saikiani". (The feminine of Saikia) She came to be known as saikiani Baidew (elder sister).

In 1921 Gandhi visited Assam and brought new awakening in the lives of the women on 21st of August at a meeting held in Tezpur. The women, who never worked in the broad day light, came out of the house to attend the meeting. Being influenced by Gandhiji Women came forward to the spread of the use of Khadi dress and the boycott of foreign clothes. Participating in the nationalistic movement women found for themselves a path which could liberate them from the clutches of the evils of the society. In 1925 Chandraprava Saikiani was the only lady invited to address the Nawgaon session of Assam Sahitya Sabha. She found that the women's section in this gathering has segregated by a partition of Bamboo reed matting, ensuring both invisibility and silence. Seeing this she protested sharply against the segregation, likening the partition to a cage imprisoning a lioness in her own home. She says "you are not ashamed to stay in a cage like this? Why don't you come out like a lioness breaking a cage? This head on attack inspired some of the women present to tear down the matting and stamp on it in a symbolic gesture of liberation. Chandraprava Saikia was inspired by Benudhar Rajkhowa Nagendra Narayan Choudhury and Mahadev Sarma to organize Mahila Samiti. 1926, in the meeting chaired by Banudhar Rajkhowa in Bijni hall the "Assam Mahila Samiti was formed under the name of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti." Saikiani was selected as the president. But before that in different places there were some of the women's organisation. In 1915 in the leadership of Hemprava Das, Dr. Tiotama Rai Choudhury and Amolprava Das, Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti was formed. In 1917 Nagoan Mahila Samiti was

formed under the leadership of Chandraprava Saikiani. So also Tezpur Mahila Samiti was formed under the leadership of Sarada Devi, Swarnamaya Devi, etc. Their objectives include maternity and child welfare, mass education, social reforms and weaving projects.

Assam Mahila Samiti played an important role in female education, abolition of parda system, female adult education, abolition of alcohol, abolition of child marriage etc. Till 1929 not even a single lady was admitted in Cotton College (a premier educational college established in 1900 at Guwahati). In 1929 the lecturer of cotton college Prafulla Chandra Rai's daughter Sujata Rai took admission in Cotton College. On the next year Guru Prasad Baruah's daughter Lila Baruah and Kamala Kanta Bhattacharjee took admission in Cotton College. The intellectuals of Assam encouraged the Assam Mahila Samiti and praised their developmental works. Gyanandaviram Baruah in the meeting of Kamrup Mahila Samiti said to the women that 'Each one of you is a Florence Nightingale'. In 1928 the First Assamese Female Magazine brought light in the life of Assamese women. Kamalya Kakoti and Kanaklata Saliha were the joint editor of the Magazine. It dealt with women education, widow remarriage, anti-dowry and problem of women etc. In 1929 the child marriage Restraint Act was passed. According to this Act girls marriage before 14 years was crime. In Assam also there was the prevalent of child marriage. After the Act was passed the Assam Mahila Samiti came forward to stop child marriage. "When the members of the Samiti got information about child marriage, went and stop the child marriage. Till then the society was in favor of child marriage and were against Mahila Samities of breaking the marriage and they named as "marriage breaking samities Rajabala Das, Shenhalata Bhattacharjee, Nalinibala Devi were the leaders. Nalinibala Devi was herself against her daughter's child marriage"11.

The Indian Independence, movement under the leadership of Gandhi awoke a new spirit in Assamese women who had been silent since ages and ages. Women cutting the four boundaries of the house came out in crowd to take part in the Independence movement, took part in non-cooperation movement, Satyagraha movement, Quit India movement etc and made the movements successful one. Woman had undergone through lathi charge, imprisonment and even was shot dead. According to Dipti Sharma's research 'Mukti Jugat Luhit Paliya Nari' (1998), 15 of the

Assamese women sacrificed their lives. Gandhi brought a new awakening in the lives of Assamese women. They for the first time came out in crowds for social works and united themselves. They gathered courage to raise voice against injustice. Rajabala Das writes "The day when open meeting was called by Mahatma Gandhi in Dibrugarh, I remember the husband of the house did not forbid his wife to join in the meeting. That is may be for the first time, the female of the state got the chance to join in the social meeting"<sup>12</sup>. In 1940, 19 September in Assam Pradesh congress committee women's section was established together with pusalata Das and Amal Prava Das as secretary Hemprava Das, Kiranmoyee Agarwalla, Nalinibala Devi, Rajabala Das, Ganeshwari Devi, Budheswari Hazarika Swarnalata Baruah, Kamlaya Kakoti, Sriprabha Saliha etc were the leaders in their own places. Chandraprava, Saikiani, Amalprava Das, Pushpalata Das etc. were leaders of the whole Assamese female society. These three leaders also took part in All India congress meeting and attracted the attention of the people. In 1930's 12th November by joining the non co-operation movement, Guneswari Devi of Nawgaon, and Muktabala Vaishnavi were imprisoned, which attracted women to follow their paths of agitation. Kanaklata (1942, 20 september), Bhogeswari Phukani (Nawgaon), Dwariki Das, Tiloswari Baruah, Kahuli Devi, Kumali Devi, Gulapi, Tunuki Das, Padmini Gogoi, Jaluki Kachari, Kan Chutiya etc sacrificed their live in the independence movement. India got Independence in 1947, "The Assamese women attacking the hesitation, fear and prohibition of ages and ages came forward in the Independence movement. The Assamese women acquired courage to fight against the injustice done to them in this period of nationalistic movement"<sup>13</sup>. "In 1947 Girls student association formed the female self Defense Samiti. In Cachar, Nagaon, Kamrup and in Shillong the committee was formed"<sup>14</sup>. In Cachar Manasi Battacharjee, Anurupa Devi, Sati Devi, Gauri Dutta, Madhuri Bhattacharjee, in Shillong Anjali Das, Kalyani Das etc. took the leadership to form the Samiti. In Nagaon, Nalini Saikia, Subadra Saiki and in Kamrup Tuksi Bhattacharjee, hena Bora, Sushila Devi etc. took the leadership. In 1951 the leader of Female self defense committee formed Ganatantrik Nari sanga. The president of this association was Minima Datta and secretary Henna Borah. This association worked against discrimination of caste, equality of women, widespread of women

education and for the economic right of women. When different branch of Nari Sangha in different district was formed then in 1971 all the different branches were joined and formed on a state level Assam Mahila Sangha. This association decided to work for the equality of men and women social, political and economic independence. In 1984 The Assam Rajya Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti was formed. The aim and purpose of the Samiti was to take steps for the social, political, economic cultural equality of women, to revolt against child marriage, polygamy, to make the women free from the tortures done in the name of religion. In Tezpur, in 1975 a group of women writer formed an association named as Assam Lekheka Parishad. It was formed to solve problems of the writer and to develop the hidden talent of the women. In 1996 the association was divided into two parts one is named as Assam Lekheka Sanstha, the other as Assam Lekhika Samaro. The association which decided to include both the educated and the uneducated women in the association come to be known as Assam Lekhika Samaro. Assam Lekhika Sanstha was formed only with the writer. The Assam Lekhika Samaro in the editorial ship of Shila Borthakur published a book named as Lekhakar Jibani (1989) which depicted the life of some female writers. So also Assam Lekhika Samaro published a book Lekhikar Galpa under the editorial ship of Pretty Baruah. Both the book tried to show that women were not inferior to men, even in the field of literature, but is only hidden due to lack of opportunity. In 1975 the working women's association formed in Dibrugarh demanded a hostel for the working women. In 8th March 1984 this association celebrated the International Women day and about three hundred women joined the meeting. It decided to take steps for the development of women education and to abolish dowry system and other social evils. In about 1980 the All Assam Lekhika Samaroh held in Nalbari organized a seminar on violence against women . It was the spirit of protest and anger against social injustice towards women which led the Lekhika Samaroh to take up a sustained campaign against local manifestation of discrimination against women.

In Assam and the entire North East there has been an unprecedented surge of popular anti state movement within the last two decades. As the Assam movement progressed it became clear that women, who were spontaneously joining the movement, had to be organized separately in order to play an effective role. Women's coordinating

committees were formed in places like Tezpur, Tinsukia, Guwahati and eventually in all Assam, an All Assam convention of Women's coordinating committee was formed to carry on the objectives of the Assam movement. Other Auxiliary women's groups with names like Mula Gabharu Sanstha, and Assam Jagrat Mahila parishad came into existence supporting the movement.

During the Assam movement and lately during the militant ULFA activities rape of tribal and manly rural women and police personnel in the course of duty has become focal point of the movements. During the Assam movement huge rallies were held in Guwahati and other places to protest against the rapes of rural women in Kamrup district by the Army. The Bhumuka rape case in Kokrajhar became the centre of a widespread agitation led by the tribal women's welfare organization and Nari Mukti Sanstha. There has been an attempt during the last few years chiefly by the leftist oriented women's organization like Mahila Sangha and Sadua Asom Nari Sanstha to develop a movement on the basis of politic and military atrocities on innocent people in the name of combating terrorism [derived from The social, movement by M.N. KARNA.] The different women's organization worked for the better half of the society. But still domestic violence, sexual exploitation, rape etc have become a day to day incident. The women's organizations are not able to solve such problems due to the lack of support from public and government. For instance a woman in Kokrajhar who was assaulted by two army men was rejected by her husband on grounds that she complied with their wishes. She was beaten up by him before being sent out of the house." All Bodo women's welfare Federation addressed the issue but added that popular support from the public and government was lacking [Discussion among participants during the North East Regional Consultation of the 9th Five Year Plan"15. (Organized by NEW and sponsored by UNIFEM, New Delhi, Umiam. Meghalaya December 8-9, 1997] It is worth mentioning that in September 2000 prominent women's group met at Shillong on NEN's invitation and discussed the issue of rights. But they also recognized the problem of conflict and urged the centre to initiate long term institutionalized steps to solve the special problems faced by women in such situations. Right to information and transparency at all levels of government they said is the need of the hour.

In the mean time writers were very much highlighting the feminism theory in their writings. In spite of their good efforts Assamese feminism is not well known even in India not to speak of other countries because of the language barrier. Most of them are writing in Assamese language for obvious reason. Very few texts have been translated into English or in Indian languages which too is not readily available. Women novelists in Post Independence Assamese literature have made a significant contribution in the literary arena. Among notable modern novelists we find women writers such as Nirupama Borgohain, Nilima Dutta, Anuradha Sarma Pujari and most noted Jyanpeeth awardee Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Goswami, a moral and social rebel, is acknowledged to be an ardent supporter of women's right. If she is not considered an ardent feminist in traditional sense as her objective was to depict life and its problems realistically and objectively, she is certainly a humanist. She was against all those aspects of contemporary living that obstructed the free self-realization of an individual personality-hypocrisies, conventions, fear of social criticism, rigidities, bigotries of institutionalized religion and all those factors, of which, under the guise of duty and loyalty or moral obligation, stop the growth of personality and inhibit the natural development of the individual and shut him off from genuine living. She was interested in freedom which is something personal- a matter of individual responsibility. She disliked outdated attitude and opinion which she found inappropriate for the new individual. Being widow at an early age; she used to wear colored sari and Bindiya which is forbidden for a widow. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novels, too, concern themselves with recent events of post-independent Assamese literature. Not only are they significant in that she focuses on the socially relevant issues, but it is also in these writings that the first stream of feminism can be seen.

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