

The Identity Conflict and Position of Assamese Women in the Medieval Assamese Society : A Historical Perspective

Biraj Jyoti Kalita

Introduction :

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of culture and civilization and realize its limitation is to study and identify the role of women into growth of civilization. Since the beginning of the human civilization, woman has been recognised as the indispensable part of a human society. Even today women have been playing a significant role in reconstruction of our socio-cultural, economic, political life. However, in building up a strong Assamese society, women played an important role in development of the Medieval Assamese society. Women played an important role in all family affairs. Besides rearing up her children and doing her household duties, she helped cultivation in every stage except ploughing. (S.L.Boruah:2007:p.p.421-422). During the medieval period, though the status of women was subordinate to men, she enjoyed great freedom in socio-economic, religious and political life. Therefore, the study set up to explore the position and status of women during the medieval period in Assam. An attempt shall be made to throw light on role of some distinguished women crusaders in making of Medieval Assamese society.

Objective of the study :

The objectives of the study are as follows :

1. To study the history of the position and status of women in the Medieval Assamese society.
2. To know the role of Assamese women in reconstruction of the Assamese society.
3. To examine the role of Assamese woman in socio-political, economic life of Assamese society during the medieval period.

4. To analyse the identity of the Assamese women during the medieval age.

Methodology :

The Historical method has been followed in the research work . The present paper is prepared with help of secondary sources of data i.e. various books, journals, articles, newspapers and website. All the source of data are critically analyzed before using.

Research Question :

The following research questions are to be posed :

1. Was women in the medieval Assamese society dominated by the patriarchal hegemony?
2. Was there any differences between women in the medieval Assamese society and women in the medieval Indian society?
3. Was Assamese tradition and culture treat women with a bias ?

Findings and Discussion :

Most important fact is that in many areas in Indian society, traditional customary law and practices are strictly adhered to. In some areas, these customary practices like Child marriage, polygamy prevailed with an approach to subjugation of women. No doubt, in context of the medieval Assamese society, there was a deep consciousness among the women about their identity for making society. During the Medieval period, the Assamese women had been playing a significant role in the household as well as in the socio-economic life of the Assamese people. In fact, the Assamese women contributed a lot towards the economic and political life of the Assamese people. During the period of our discussion on the basic of the records and sources, it can be said that educational institutions were very few in number, therefore the number of female persons were very poor for getting of education. Then, it may be noted that some Assamese women got opportunity to take education. It is evident from the *Brhat Rajvamsavali* that the ladies of the Bhuyan families were comparatively well educated .One Pratap Bhuyan, a relative of Sankardeva had a daughter named Bhanumati who was given in marriage to the Koch King Naranarayana. After coronation of the Bhanumati became the chief queen and took the name Ratnamala .It was by her order that the great Sanskrit scholar Purusottam Bhattacharyya wrote the Sanskrit grammar, called "Prayog Ratnamala". (Sabeshwar Rajguru:1998:p.198) Then, it is to be noted that Chaoching, the queen of the Ahom king Suklengmung, aliens Gargayan Raja who hailed from the neighbouring Nara country was an accomplished scholar in the Ahom language and could write in Ahom language with the toes of her feet.(S.K. Bhuyan :1945 :p.32). We also know that many of the Ahom queens had patronised the intellectuals personalities. By the permission of King Siva Singha and his queen Ambika, Sukumar Barkath wrote the famous book, "Hastividyanava". Further, Ananta Acharyya, a court poet wrote the instance of queen Pramatheswari alias Phulesvari.

It may be noted that Chandari, the nurse of Sankardeva was a woman of great intelligence who quite acquainted with the teaching of the Gita and the art of painting and could take part in religious discussion.

Regarding the status of Assamese women in the religious field, some of the women got opportunity to take part in the religious institution or religious rituals. But it may be pointed out that the women are not allowed to enter in the main religious prayer institution ,i.e., "Kirtan Ghar " in the Neo- Vaishnavism fold. Moreover, the women cannot become "Kavalya" which considered as discrimination against the women. Sankardava who was the great saint of the Neo-Vaishnava movement says :

"The dire illusions created by women

The most hideous of all illusion." (Ranjit Kumar Devogoswami :2005 :p.50)

However, the women participated in the religious activities of the Sattra institutions. Amongst such women mention may be made of the learned Bhubanesvari , the daughter of Harideva and Ai-Kanaklata, the grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva. (Sabeswar Rajguru,1998, p.198). It may be noted that Bhubanesvari was the first woman to become the headship of the religious institution in Assam. Ai Kanaklata, also played a significant role in managing the Sattras. As we know that Chandari, the nurse of Sankardeva was a great religious intelligence with teachings of the Gita and art of Paintings. It may be noted that Neo-Vaishnavism did not advocate of the life of celibacy. There was the religious discrimination against women.

During the medieval period , some of the Assamese women were very heroic with perfect accomplishment. The Assamese women played a vital role as administrator or as heroic soldier in the battlefield or even as a common subject. From the evidence of historical source, it is found that the chief queen of the Ahom King, Tao-khamti (1380-1389) was the first women who played a direct role in the administration of the Ahom Kingdom. She took the charge of administration when the king was out for war. It may be noted that She could not manage the administration because she did not get any help and cooperation from the ministers of the Ahom kingdom. It is also found that during period of conflict between the Ahom King and the Chutia king ,Sadhani ,queen of Chutia king, Nitipal acted as a advisor to his husband in the matters of administration. After defeat of her husband in the war with the Ahom king, she committed suicide death. During the Ahom regime, Queen Phuleswari, Queen Ambika and Sarbesvari played a vital role in the politics when their husband, King Siva Singha decided to hand over the charge of the administration to them. Queen Phuleswari took the charge of the administration and assumed the title, "Bar Raja" or "Great King". Queen Phuleswari also minted coin in the joint name of herself and his husband, Siva Singha. It may be noted that Queen Phuleswari believed

in the Saktism and wanted to make Saktism as the state religion. Hence, this led a conflict between the State and the Sattras or Monasteries of Vaisnava. Later on this considered to be one facing for decline of the Ahom Kingdom. But Queen Phuleswari had an number of good merit and qualities. She inspired the scholars to create literary works. Queen Phuleswari also established a school in the palace campus for teaching Sanskrit .It may be noted that she constructed the Gaurisagar tank near the present town of Sibsagar. She built the three temples which were dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi. It is to be noted that Queen Ambika was a great patron of education and learning. She patronised many scholars to create works. During her Regime, the famous Sivsagar tank and temple were constructed. During the regime of Shuhungmung, Mulagabharu, the wife of Franchengmung Borgohain who died in war with Turbak , mobilised a women force and took the leadership of it (Sarbeswar Rajguru:1998:p.201) It may be noted that Thaomung,s wife Chaochao Nangbu ,Kuranganayani ,the wife of king Rajeshwar Singha played a significant role in the politics .In the same way , mention can be made of the two wives of Naharkhora ,named Radha and Rukmini who faught against the royal forces of the Ahom king in the revolution called Moamaria Bidroh. (S.K.Bhuyan(ed.),1932,p.60). (At the time of Mirjumla's invasion while king Jayaddvaja Singha escaped to Namrup, a woman of the fighter man community who met him on the Dalauguri road , in a tone of reprimanding the king said , "oh King ,you have spent the last fifteen years of your reign in pleasure and luxury only; had you been conscious enough to give at least fifteen sods of soil where it was necessary , in these long fifteen years ,why such a state of things should have befallen you .Now leavings us in such a state of affairs .where do you want to go ?) (S.K.Bhuyan(ed.):1960:p.90) It may be noted that Ramani Gabharu who was a daughter of Ahom king Jayaddvaj Singha was handed over to Mirjumla in according to the terms of treaty between the Mughal and the Ahom king. After Ramani Gabharu married with Azamtara, the third son of the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb. She was named as Rahmat Banu. It is interesting to her that Jaymati , wife of king Gadadhar singha was one of the great woman crusaders during the medieval age. She raised her voice against the patriarchal hegemony of the Ahom King. At the same period , Court ladies and nurses played a vital role in the administration and political field. King Naranarayana who was great king of Koch Kingdom helped by his nurse to get throne .Therefore, regarding to the women identity in politics, it can be said that the upper class Assamese women , basically the royal family women played a more significant role in the administrative matters than the other part of India.

In economic field ,the position of women was efficient in the art of spinning ,weaving ,embroidery and dyeing .It may be noted that women were interested in weaving .King Siva

Singha's consort queen Sarbesvari herself taught young girls of different communities , batch by batch ,the art of spinning ,weaving and singing and dancing within the royal harem under her own supervision.(Sarbeswar Rajguru:1998;pp.202) In those days ,the Assamese women had supplied a piece of cloth known as Kavach -Kapor to their warrior husbands which they had to spin and weave within a night.(S.K.Bhuyan(ed.),1945, p21)

It may be noted that the Assamese women considered to be expert in the allied arts like dancing, singing, painting etc. Chandari, the nurse of Sankardeva painted the celestial Baikuntha for placing the divine Kalpataru Brksa. Also it may be noted that under the advice of the Ahom King Siva Singha and his queen Phulesvari, an illustrated work with specific picture was written by Kaviraj Chakravarty who was the famous poet during the medieval age .As said above ,another consort of king Siva Singha ,named Sarbesvari ,taught a large number of young girls ,the singing and dancing under own supervision.(Sarbeswar Rajguru:1998:p.203) It is found that a class of women belonged to the class of Nata were by profession expert dancers .During the medieval age , the Assamese women acquired some sort of efficiency in the art of singing celestial and devotional songs like Borgeet, Bhatima ,Tokari etc.

In the social context , the position of Assamese women considered to be better than the women of other parts of Indian society. The wives of the Rajah and the peasants never veiled their faces before any body and they moved about in the market places with bare heads.(S.L.Boruah :2007: p.421).

The institution of marriage was performed in accordance of the Hindu rites and rituals. It may be noted that the system of widow was prevailed among surdas. In regarding to the Sati system ,there are many incidents of Sati during the medieval age. In the biographical literature of the Medieval period ,it is found that at the death of kusumbara, father of Sankardeva ,his (Kusumbara,s) wife Satya Sandhya became a Sati at her husbands funeral pyre.(Sarbeswar Rajguru:1998:p.196) .However above all, it can be said that the identity and status of the Assamese women were better than the women of other parts Indian society.

Conclusion :

From the above discussion it is seen that position of Assamese women was not bad in the medieval age. The Assamese women acquired several rights in matters of education, marriage, social and political field during the medieval period. From the above study , it is found that the Sati as well as the Purdah system prevailed some part of Assam but the nature of its application was different from the other parts Indian society. The study reveals that the Assamese women like Bhubenesvari, Ai Kanaklata, Mulagabharu, Phulesvari contributed a lot in making the progressive mentality amongst the Assamese women. This progressive mindset created a sense of identity among women and they became awakening for their right

in the matter of social, religious, economic and political fields. These reasons, inter alia, women of Assam openly came out to join in the activities of the national movement. Although, women played a passive role in the medieval Assamese society, yet they played a significant role as a reformist to reconstruct the Assamese society.

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