Reconstructing nineteenth and early twentieth century challenges to women’s education in Assam, India.

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Abstract

The British colonial period of Assam (1826-1947) was characterized by efforts to realign societal norms on modern lines without completely disassociating from the main tenets of its tradition. In this context, the nineteenth century in particular and the early twentieth century is important in the history of Assam as elsewhere in India, for it witnessed the entry of girls into the formal system of education. It is self-contradictory that education, which is one of the potent instruments of social change, would also be used to strengthen the prevalent patriarchal societal norms and further deny women opportunities to learn new roles. The present study would basically concern itself in reconstructing the opposition and challenges to women’s education in Assam as reflected in the nascent Vernacular Press during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The work is limited to the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

Keywords: Patriarchal Values, Periodicals, Society, Women’s Education.

1. Introduction

The province of Assam is at the far north eastern corner of India. It is roughly between the latitudes 28°18' and 24° N, and longitudes 89°46' and 97°4'E (Das, 1970). Bordered by China and Bhutan in the North-East, Burma in the South-East and penetrable from the Bay of Bengal in the South through the mighty Brahmaputra, it has three natural divisions, - the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and Karbi Anglong Hills. When it came under British domination in 1826, it comprised of territories lying on both sides of the Brahmaputra. Assam, because of her geographical location and topography, had virtually remained isolated from the rest of the country.

1.1 The history of Assam in the nineteenth century witnessed great socio-political and economic transformations. It saw the collapse of the six hundred years old Ahom rule and the imposition of British colonial rule, which brought about considerable changes in the socio-political fabric of the province. Aided by three major simultaneous influences in the province, viz., the spread of British administration and its associated infrastructure, the activities of the American Baptist missionaries and the impact of the Bengal Renaissance, a new awakening emerged in the Brahmaputra Valley in the second half of the nineteenth century (Bora, 2005). It brought essential changes in the mindset of a small but powerful group of intelligentsia in Assamese society. A significant development occurred in the realm of changing attitude towards women. For the first time, women issues were discussed and debated in the public domain, as women for long had remained in the periphery of society. In their justification of the creation of a just social
order for women, the reformers now brought issues like polygamy, marriage reforms and women's education in the public sphere (Goswami, 2010).

2. Objectives of the study
- To unearth how patriarchal values had posed hurdles to the progress of women's education in Assam in the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- To determine the attitude of the influential middle class regarding women's education and their role and functions in society as reflected in the periodicals of the period.

3. Methodology
The present study has been based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include archival records, periodicals, unpublished and published documents. Further, important publications and journals were also accessed from a historical perspective.

4. Discussion
During the period under review, the status of the Assamese women varied according to caste, class and religion. Although their position was relatively better when compared to most of their other Indian counterparts, there existed dual standards of power, status and morality for the male and the female due to the existence of a patriarchal society. The home space was identified with women, and the public space with men. Infact, "in the sphere of structural elaboration, sex differentiations gradually but inevitably involves in a manner such that societal roles which are linked to production, governance and ecclesiastics became more or less the exclusive domain of men" (Gupta, 1986). Concurrently, the biological capacity of the female to reproduce the human species and ensure its survival, has led to her being assigned roles which have progressively tied her down to the home and withdrew her from the wider economic, political and religious arenas of social participation (Gupta, 1986). Thus “although the Assamese woman generally played a multifarious role — that of a wife, mother, cook, homemaker, weaver and in most cases as a farm worker, work outside the home was seen merely as an extension of her duties as a wife and mother.” (Goswami, ed, 2010).

4.1 In such an atmosphere of deprivation and discrimination against women, the nineteenth century in particular and the early twentieth century assumes importance as it witnessed the entry of girls into formal systems of education due to the collective efforts of the Christian missionaries, the British Indian government and the social reformers of the age. It is important to note that prior to the coming of the British, female education in Assam was informal and largely limited to acquiring of practical household skills. In short, the work attempts to reconstruct the challenges posed to women's education in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Assam as reviewed from the periodicals of the period.

4.2 It is important to note that “Assam came under British rule nearly a century after East India Company’s contact with Bengal. Naturally, Assam lagged behind Bengal in receiving modern education which was mainly responsible for the new awakening in Bengal. The renaissance in Assam was however different from that of Bengal” (Barpujari, 2007). While in Bengal it was a multi-dimensional movement, in Assam it was predominantly literary, though from the middle of the nineteenth century, individual efforts were made to eradicate some of the social evils and superstitious beliefs conforming Assamese society. (Barpujari, 2007).

4.3 The messengers of change in colonial Assam were a handful of Assamese men, mostly educated in western learning and belonging to the upper strata of society with close association with Bengal. They were the first in the province to include women in their agenda of social reform. But as most of the reform agendas were male engineered and mainly concerned with the caste Hindu social norms, its fruitfulness had already become restricted. Infact, many among them subscribed to the views of Manu, the ancient Hindu law giver, whose views upon women were biased. Manu's injunctions had witnessed the beginnings of a systematic deprivation of Indian women in matters of education which led to narrowing of their mental and intellectual horizon.
4.4 Ratneswar Mahanta, an educated middle class man, in his article ‘Ghainir Kartavya Aru Stree Shiksha (duties of a wife and women’s education) published in the Assamese news magazine Assam Bandhu, 1885, expected the Assamese women to initiate the ideals of the Dharmashastras, and to ignore most of the new western learnings. In the absence of any alternate ideology of reform, the Assamese women were led to appropriate the ideals of the Aryan women. Commenting on the status of women in the nineteenth century, William Robinson (1975) in his book observed:

“A state of dependence more humiliating than that to which the weaker sex is here subject, cannot easily be conceived. Like most women of India, they are denied even the least portion of education and are excluded from every social circle. They are even accounted unworthy to partake of religious rites, except in conjunction with their husbands.... Females are not included within the pale of education; every ray of mental improvement is kept away from the sex. As they are always confined to domestic duties, and excluded from the society of the other sex, the people see no necessity for their education. A woman’s duties are comprised in ‘pleasing her husband’ and cherishing her children.”

4.5 Education is one of the potent instruments of social change. Yet, it is self contradictory, as education is also used to strengthen the prevalent patriarchal norms which includes that a woman be an expert in domestic work and devoted to her husband and family alone. It further denies women opportunities to learn new roles. As Christian missionaries ceaselessly engaged themselves in a programme of female education in Assam, many became critical of their activities and the impact of western influence, which they argued, resulted in the erosion of traditional values. Given conventional notions of impropriety and even danger with regard to female education, a superstitious belief also existed that a girl who can read and write will become widow soon after marriage. (Vas, 1911). Being a patriarchal society, women were totally dependent on males, be it father, husbands or sons for support.

4.6 By the end of the nineteenth century, female education became a major issue in the public sphere. The print media provided the Assamese literate with the powerful medium to express their views on women. That a woman’s proper sphere was the ‘home’, found reflection in the public debates carried out in periodical writings of the time. The middle class literati justified women’s education so as to create suitable companions for educated men. In the issues of the Jonaki, one of the leading journals, the education for both boys and girls was considered as crucial for the progress of the country and society. But the education of girls was role oriented. The education for women should be such, which could teach them to be better wives, to live happily within the strict discipline of in-laws and to be better mothers as on them would depend the character of the future generation. Thus, though education was to confine women within the home, yet, paradoxically, the progress of the nation was linked to their education. An article published in the Jonaki (1904) observed, “If we look at the history of civilizations, we will find that only those civilizations are moving towards progress, which have female education.... as only the children of educated mothers can be expected to become great in the future, but it would be difficult to educate the children of uneducated mothers.” Nevertheless, the response to women’s education was not too encouraging.

4.7 The writings of the period overwhelmingly bring forth the male viewpoint which hardly ventured beyond the prevailing patriarchal notions. The intelligentsia in Assam like their counterparts in Bengal were staunch supporters of traditional values and stood for the patriarchal notions of society. Phanindra Nath Gogoi, wrote in the Jonaki ( Saka 1812), “While I am in favour of women’s education, I do not support the present system. I am totally against a type of education for women that would enable then to pass their B.A or M.A examinations and encourage then to compete with their husbands. I do not see the woman to be educated like a man, since such education causes more harm than good.” This trend is evident even in the writings of
Lakshminath Bezbarua, one of the brightest luminaries of Assamese literature. In *Rus Deshat Tini Rati*, Bezbarua had stated that the aim of women’s education should be to produce good wives and mothers rather than rivals of men in the sphere of employment.

4.8 One of the common objections raised against women’s education was that an educated woman would be devoid of character. The monthly *Mau* or the *Bee* (1886-88), edited by Harinarayan Bora held advanced and progressive views on burning questions of the day. Yet, in an article entitled, *Tirotar Bon ki* (the duties of a woman) published in the *Mau* (1886), it expressed the fear that western culture, higher education of women in particular, would produce a greater disaster than the invasion of the Burmese in Assam. Phanindranath Gogoi, in an article which appeared in the *Jonaki*, puts forward an argument that the main role of a woman was the smooth running of the household by becoming a good mother and a loyal companion to the husband. He viewed that too much of education would make women adverse to domestic chores.

4.9 The Assamese intelligentsia with strong patriarchal leanings believed that since the roles of the male and female were biologically conditioned, the nature of education imparted to men and women, must also necessarily be different. Apart from reading, writing and arithmetic, women need to acquaint themselves with the new norms of middle class cleanliness, management of budget and to maintain a healthy diet for the family. An article in *Jonaki* (1905), expressed the view that since the men after must labour bring money to the home, it is the duty of women to use the money in a proper way. Further, Ratneswar Mahanta had remarked that daughters-in-law without formal education were much more suited to family life than those with education. The observations clearly reflected the narrow conservative outlook of their social circle. As elsewhere in India, the education system in Assam was meant for men which was now to be partially adapted to make possible the entry of women. It was a compromise between the new demands of the emerging urban households and the traditional notions of female subordination (O’Hanlon, 2000). Partha Chatterjee had rightly made the observation that reform agendas on women did not challenge the existing patriarchal authorities and the ‘new women’ was subjected to a new form of patriarchy.

5. Conclusion

The periodicals of the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, expressed by and large the dominant male views on women. Their writings reflect their strong belief that education imparted to men and women must be different. The primary goal of women’s education was the domestic well being of the family. Women’s literacy was perceived to be contrary to feminine virtues inviting wickedness, aversion to domestic duties and disrespect to traditional culture. It was feared that literate women would compete with men in all walks of life. A common superstition was that educated women were destined to become widows and a general belief prevailed that too much intellectual work would shrivel up a woman’s ovaries and renders her both unfeminine and consequently irrelevant. (Goswami, 2010). The forces of tradition proved to be too powerful to make any effective changes in the condition of women.

5.1 It was evident from their attacks on women’s education, that the writers contributing to the periodicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply tied to the patriarchal notions of society. The concepts of an independent identity of women as an individual entity was not subscribed then, but however, running as an undercurrent we do see an independent consciousness beginning to emerge from amongst the women, which the dominant culture was unwilling to give expression to. (Sharma, 2010)

5.2 Despite opposition to women’s education, a modest beginning had been made which saw the slow but gradual emergence of an independent consciousness among the women, which gathered further strength during the nationalist struggle for independence. There is enough evidence that can be unearthed from various types of literary sources as well as state papers of the period which reveal that before the end of the nineteenth
century and throughout the twentieth century, women were striving to establish their identities, only, that history has gone into the hidden pages of the written records. (Sharma, 2010). But a general awakening had begun and it could not be permanently suppressed.

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