SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

WOMEN'S AGENCY and SOCIAL CHANGE

Assam and Beyond

MEETA DEKA

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Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond focuses on varied oppression, power relations and ideologies embedded in the complex yet interdependent social, political, economic and legal structures, and women's subordination therein.

British intervention, 1826–1947, by itself did not impact the agency aspect on women directly, but the emergence of new forces and factors sowed the seeds of women's agency to impact social change, even if minimal. In the post-Independence period, British colonial legacy perpetuated the subordination of women through caste and class hierarchy at several levels, but an undercurrent of a feminist struggle persisted, not merely as a movement but also at individual levels.

The book is written with the hope of encouraging future research on women's experiences in the Northeastern region of India, and elsewhere, based on the belief that knowledge production is, in itself, the praxis against oppressive structures and the need to understand the historical processes that slowly transformed women to become catalysts of social transformation.

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Women's Agency and Social Change

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Meeta Deka

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Foreword

By addressing the topic of women's history in Northeast India, specifically Assam, Meeta Deka has addressed two marginalized topics: women and the Northeast. Unfortunately, the history of Northeast India has been left out of standard histories of India, and women of the Northeast left out of histories of Indian women. Although this region resisted foreign control, outside influences had and continue to have a major impact on the economy and society and, especially, on women. Women experienced historical events in ways similar to their sisters in the plains, but the differences make generalization impossible.

Designed to encourage feminist research by addressing salient theoretical and methodological questions and identifying topics and areas for future exploration, *Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond* is a valuable starting point in a field that needs attention. Constructed from Deka's published articles and unpublished conference papers, this book makes visible the basic assumptions behind women's history and the concept of gender, provides an indispensable bibliography of what has been written about women and gender in Assam and illustrates feminist methodologies for retrieving women and gender through archaeology, myth, colonial reports, literature and the study of tattooing. The three chapters—'Women and Law', 'Women and Economy' and 'Changing Patriarchy and Women's Space in Politics'—illustrate the kind of questions historians can explore and how they might go about this work. Throughout this book, Deka urges the reader to think about the absence of women in the historical record, the difficulty of retrieving their stories and the importance of locating women as agents of change and restoring them to their rightful place in history.

Researching and writing women's history are still a relatively new project but one that has become more complex as we proceed. The few histories of women written before the 1970s celebrated elite women who had received the praise of men or vilified those who disrupted the established order. The 1970s marked the beginning of feminist historiography, which, in the beginning, was infused with the excitement of discovery. Before long, it became apparent that while we were rescuing a few women who had achieved remarkable

things, the lives of the vast majority were beyond our grasp. The second sex, feminist historians realized, did not have an equal role in determining the fate of their societies and could not be found in the archive. This reality led to a new focus: a re-examining of the persistence of domination and gender hierarchies and to new methodologies to recover women's lived lives. Through this work, historians came to the realization that the story was not a simple one of gloom and doom but rather a complex tale of women making choices, albeit within a limited framework, to achieve what was important to them. Because feminist historiography has always borrowed from and contributed to other disciplines, it was impacted by the rise of cultural studies and the focus on gender over the concrete and binary notion of sex.

This task is no longer simple, whether one is writing a history of Mughal queens or female labour in coal mines. Meeta Deka knows this and her work on women in Assam exhibits an awareness of the complexity and, in fact, impossibility of writing about 'women' or producing a narrative that will answer all questions. This book has elements of all the phases of women's history to date in that it recovers women for history, reveals their oppression and struggles with patriarchy, discovers and presents their transition from family-centred to more public roles, and analyzes the gendered context of their lives. But, as the author is clear, this book is not about the 'women' of Assam but about some women—women in the Brahmaputra Valley—belonging mostly to the middle class and from colonial times to the present. Deka is very clear that this is not a definitive history but rather a call to engage in research, discovery, recovery, revision and questioning. This is a beginning to a long and fruitful enterprise to add Assamese women to the gendered histories of the world.

Deka's attention to setting the stage for her discussion of women's history and the history of gender as well as documentation and theory sets this book apart. As a professor of history, the author is well aware that a majority of those interested in women's and gender history want an introduction to the field and to know why feminist historians believe this as a separate discipline. Deka introduces her audience to a range of topics that have concerned feminist historians: retrieving women's lives, creating the woman subject, understanding how societies produce and reproduce gender inequality, interrogating agency and using theoretical perspectives from cultural studies to illuminate historical questions. In this book, the author embraces the goals of both women's history and gender history. While it has been the goal of women's history to change patriarchy and gendered constructions of women, the goal of gender history is to make visible the

relationship of power to gender. Meeta Deka's delightful book is destined to become an indispensable tool for teaching the history of Assamese women and women's history in India.

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21 November 2012

Preface

Women's Agency and Social Change is written with the idea of encouraging feminist research in Northeast India and identifying new areas of investigation: the spadework for future research. It is also intended to get to the basics of understanding gender so as to reach out to the new researcher and general readers as well. In many ways colonial rule (1826–1947) with its administrative mechanisms in politics, economy, religion and societies, tribal and non-tribal of the region, to meet its economic interests ushered new ideas through reform, English education and new elements in the existing patriarchies. Its impact on the general society resulted in carving out a 'public' space, though temporarily, for women in the struggle for India's independence. This was largely catalytic to women becoming agents of social transformation, particularly in the post-Independence period. The idea for the title, *Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond* is taken from Amartya Sen's chapter on 'Women's Agency and Social Change' in *Development as Freedom*, in which he begins by stating that the rights of well-being and free agency of women as contained in Mary Wollstonecraft's classic work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), published over 200 years ago, is still in the agenda of women's movements today (Sen: 2008). The distinction between 'agency' and 'welfare' is of importance in understanding policies, social movements and development. The '*welfare* aspect' implies a fight for rights, and the removal of deprivation and gender inequality, and the '*agency aspect*' regards 'women as active agents of change, [and] which can transform their own lives and the lives of other women, and ... everyone in society—women, men and children'. To quote:

> The agency aspect refers to the pursuit of goals and objectives that a person has reason to value and advance ... which could, quite possibly, be very broad, such as independence of one's country ... removal of gender inequality in general ... in championing these broader ends people may not be primarily influenced by the extent to which these general objectives affect their own quality of life or welfare. (Sen: 2005)

In the course of women's participation in India's struggle for freedom, and the evolution of women's movements in India, as also in Assam, women's

objectives have extended from a welfarist stance to become agents of social change themselves. Sen maintained that women in general are no more 'the passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen, by men as well as by women, as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformation' (Sen: 2008). The focus of this book is not on the women's movement of Assam. The women's movement in Assam began under colonial rule, persisted for a time but soon became so intertwined with the Indian National Movement that it ultimately got submerged under the pressure of the anti-imperialist struggle. The book aims at an interpretive historical analysis of women in Assam and perceives women as forces of change within the politico-social and economic power relations of the society at large. Papers presented at different seminars and conferences on varied aspects, like social, political, economy, and laws related to women, form the basis of the book and will perhaps reflect women as facilitators of social metamorphosis. It may be mentioned that the papers are all preliminary surveys and require detailed analyses. The main objective of this book is to generate ideas for further research, a process of agency or praxis by itself, with an emphasis on the need to understand the historical processes that slowly transformed women of Assam to being active agents of social change.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude first and foremost to Professor Geraldine Forbes, Distinguished Teaching Professor of History and Women's Studies, State University of New York and author of *The New Cambridge History of India: Women in Modern India* (1998) for those words of encouragement and for going through the entire manuscript and writing the foreword. I would also like to thank SAGE Publications, New Delhi, and the editorial team for their suggestions. My thanks to Mrinal and Radha for the translation and to Jayanta Deka, Indrajit Bezbarua, Himangsu Sarmah and Manas Kakoty for their support in the field work.

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Introduction

Colonialism in Assam (1826–1947), with its baggage of ideas and policies, was largely instrumental in changing the social structure that began to influence patriarchy on Western lines and enhance women's subordination in uneven ways. British rule represents a transitional phase, the crossroads, in the lives of most women, particularly with the transgression of boundaries of the so-called 'private sphere' through their participation in the national struggle for independence. These women were mostly of the upper caste/class of the urban areas who offered leadership in the movement, while women of several ethnic communities of remote villages in the hills and plains remained outside its purview. Some of these urban women were educated in their homes and some were spouses of English-educated men studying at Calcutta. Thus then, as in the rest of India, the genesis of women's liberation movement in Assam is to be located within the context of the 19th century socio-religious reform movement and the simultaneous growth of the spirit of nationalism. The women's movement recognized customs like polygamy, prohibition of widow-remarriage and rights related to property inheritance—issues concerning the upper-class women in the main—as sources of their subordination rather than patriarchy functioning within the class/caste structures. As in other parts of India, the women's movement petered out as the anti-imperialist struggle gained momentum. In the post-Independence period, British colonial legacy perpetuated the subordination of women through caste and class hierarchy at several levels. However, some educated middle-class women of the colonial period may be seen as catalytic agents of change who tried to break free from the shackles of patriarchy, particularly by venting their ideas through literary works, if not entirely through practice.

Colonial Assam constituted a larger geographical area than in the present times. Politically, Assam was an independent state; 'a forbidden kingdom', so called by one of the early French travellers, Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in 1755, for whom the wait of six months for the grant of permission to enter the kingdom was a test of patience (Chevalier: 2008).[1] It was annexed by the British in 1826, terminating 600 years' of Ahom rule.[2] Assam under the colonial regime included the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley,

Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Cachar, Manipur, Naga Hills, Garo Hills and the Lushai (Mizo) Hills. Since the 1960s, this entire region became known as 'Northeast India'. The post-Independence period witnessed the growth of several political developments. The 'princely states' of Manipur and Tripura were forced to merge with the Indian government in 1949 through the Instrument of Accession, and until now secessionist movements exist in both these states. Movements for statehood began following the imposition of 'Assamese' as the official language of the state in 1960, and Nagaland (1963), Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura became separate states in 1972. So Northeast India consists of seven states, and of late, Sikkim has been added as the eighth state. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim are hill states with small valleys, while Assam, Manipur and Tripura cover both hills and plains.

The book relates to women of the Brahmaputra Valley during the colonial and post-Independence period, although a few references are made to women of the precolonial times. It attempts to cover elite, middle-class as well as ordinary women; only some aspects of women of tribal societies have been touched upon. The Northeast region as a whole is inhabited by over 200 of the 635 tribal groups in the country, sharing greater affinity, besides geographical, in terms of race, culture and tradition with its eastern neighbours, that is, for example, China, Tibet and Myanmar than with mainland proper. Colonial Assam is an interesting mix of patriarchal, patrilineal as well as matrilineal societies, such as those of the Khasis, the Syntengs, the Garos and the Tiwas or Lalungs. In the Brahmaputra Valley, societies of the Dimasas and the Bodos also manifest certain patrilineal features, while others like the Koches and Rabhas represent strong patriarchies. It is imperative to note that gender varies across cultures, over historical time and geographical space, among groups within a particular culture and even during one's life span. The meanings of gender vary from one society to another. What it means to be a man or a woman in an ethnic tribal society, say a Bodo or Rabha or Dimasa, is very different from what it means to be a man or a woman in the Hindu or Muslim caste society. Again, gender may vary among different groups of the same culture at any particular time. Hence, masculinity and femininity are not and cannot be

> constant, universal essences common to all women and all men. Rather, gender is an ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors ... we must speak of masculinities and femininities [and] by pluralizing the terms, we acknowledge that masculinity and femininity mean different things to different groups of people at different times. (Kimmel: 2004)

A historical analysis of ethnic women of tribal societies is an important and almost virgin area for research.

Historical Amnesia and the Concept of Gender

Historiography in general suffers from an amnesia in respect to several categories that include women, peasants, workers and other marginalized voices. Pointers to this loophole, particularly with regard to women, have made a tremendous impact in the social sciences and humanities. This 'historical amnesia' was diagnosed by the growth of feminism and feminist movements since the 1960s, which has had a long history. For more than two centuries, women authors have produced works attacking male dominance in societies and have emphasized the need for women's emancipation. Most historical works are generally about men and written by men. However, there has been a new interest in feminist history or the growth in the history of women, an impetus derived from the writings of Sheila Rowbotham, particularly her book *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight against it*, published in 1973. Since then, women's history began to take shape under titles like 'making visible', 'exploring', 'liberating' or 'rewriting', reflecting the ideas of Rowbotham. June Purvis describes this growth as 'forged overwhelmingly by women, though it was specifically feminists who set the pace' (Purvis: 2002). Hence feminist history developed separately from mainstream history, and still has only an indirect relationship with it. Of late, in several colleges and universities of India as in the rest of the world, a deliberate attempt has been made at various levels to include women's studies into the syllabi, and specifically to integrate women into the writing of history.

Throughout the ages, woman's influence, social position, economic status and cultural power altered with the social metamorphosis taking place all the time, at different levels in different countries. This section traces the genesis of historical amnesia, to locate the woman and her position in history, to analyse why and at which point of time in history was the woman 'hidden from history', with a brief explanation of the term 'gender' without entering into the diversified debates and issues centred round it. 'Gender' in historiography primarily implies evaluation of the roles of both men and women in shaping history. Gender history is born out of the second-wave feminism in the West, and it has initiated the rethinking and the rewriting of all previous historical writings. Gender is now considered as central to any coherent

social or historical analysis. This necessitates specifically the inclusion of the contribution of women to historical developments, which has been neglected or ignored in most historical works so far. Gender as a tool for analysis has led to the development of research and theories in women's studies. The basis for an explanation of the term, even in its historical implication, lies in an understanding of the basic distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. *Gender* takes on different dimensions in sexology, psychoanalysis and anthropology. Through the analyses of critic and historian Michel Foucault, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the Austrian psychiatrist Richard Von Kraft-Ebing, Alex Comfort, Kate Millet, Joan Scott and others, gender has had its bearing on the usage of the term in history, 'gender in history' or that history is '*gender*-absent'. It leads to the question of the basic distinction between sex and gender, including the translation of sex into gender. [3]

Robert J. Stoller in his book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Feminity* (1968) used the term 'gender' to imply the complexities of human behaviour that are related to the sexes 'and yet do not have primarily biological connotations' (Glover and Kaplan: 2001). Kate Millet drew upon Stoller's work, when she wrote on the theory of patriarchy in *Sexual Politics* (1970), to underline her argument that 'male and female are really two cultures' and explained that 'sex is biological, gender psychological, and therefore cultural' (Glover and Kaplan: 2001). Women and men are biologically different with different reproductive anatomies, brain structures, musculature, etc. 'Sex' is male and female; 'gender' refers to cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity—the meanings of 'maleness or femaleness' (Kimmel: 2002). Kathy Davies gives a very clear explanation of the term gender, implying the division of people into two differentiated groups of 'men' and 'women', and the organization of the major aspects of society along those binaries. The binary divisions develop into 'complex hierarchical system of dominance and subordination' as they 'override individual differences and intertwine with other major socially constructed differences', such as race, ethnicity, wealth, age and religion. To quote Davies: 'Gender divisions permeate not only individual's sense of self, families, and intimate relationships, but also structure work, politics , law, education, medicine, the military, religion and culture'. She further maintains that gender is a system of power, which is 'constructed and maintained by both the dominants and the oppressed because both ascribe to its values in personality and identity formation. It is hegemonic in that many of its assumptions and processes are 'invisible, unquestioned and unexamined' (Davies: 2006).

While attuned to gender differences, a gender-neutral perspective in the writing of history must go beyond dichotomies between masculine and feminine voices, experiences and perspectives. It requires an exploration of the commonalties and differences among women as well as between women and men that flow from class position, race, caste, ethno-cultural identity etc. Hence, the term 'gender' has to be taken in an encompassing connotation which would imply

> the socially constricted and culturally determined characteristics associated with women and men, the assumptions made about their skills, and abilities of women and men based on these characteristics, the conditions in which women and men live and work, the relations that exist between women and men, and how these are represented, transmitted and maintained. (Itzin and Newman: 1995)

It includes social relations and relations of power within the complex hierarchical structures. Such an understanding would help in working out a comprehensive analysis of the role of women and men in bringing about social, economic and even political change. Gender so defined pervades the experience of both women and men in all cultures, structures and practices of societies.

Locating gender within the realm of culture became the primary means of challenging 'the supposed inevitability of women's subordination'. In analysing feminist research of over a decade, historian Joan Scott has described this as 'a genuine historicization and deconstruction' of masculinity and femininity that sought to reduce the biological importance of the terms. According to Scott, gender is 'a social category imposed on a sexed body' (Glover: 2001). Social anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1974) recognizes 'human universals', the subordination of women as a pan-cultural fact and 'cultural particulars', that women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods, in the history of particular cultural traditions.

Ortner pointed out that this universal fact and cultural variation are two factors that constitute the problem in understanding the term gender. She further states that all cultures recognize a differentiation between men and women and questions as to why all cultures place a lower value upon women than men.[4] This imbalance is the result of cultural factors and cannot be attributed to biological origin (Ortner: 1974). Kimmel puts forth similar questions:

> Why is it that virtually every single society differentiates people on the basis of gender? Why is it that virtually every known society is also based on male

> domination? ... the basic facts remain: virtually every society known to us is founded upon the assumptions of gender difference and the politics of gender inequality. (Kimmel: 2004)

Ortner suggests that this inequality is closely related to the distinction between human society and the natural worlds. Culture is defined as development and its capacity to control nature and is, therefore, considered superior to nature. It is thus nature which is 'devalued' in every culture and women are considered closer to nature because of their menstrual cycle, gestation, childbirth and child-rearing which are 'natural' manifestations of creative power. Hence, women are identified with nature, men with culture and since culture is about control of nature, then it is 'natural' that women, by virtue of their connection with nature, should also be controlled. Ortner argues that the formulation of 'nature is to culture as female is to male' provided social anthropology with a powerful analytical framework which made a wide impact on the discipline in the late 1970s and early 1980s but argues that the association of women with nature is not 'natural', but is in fact a symbolic component of patriarchy. She emphasized that women are not any closer to, or further from, nature than men and that it is important to identify and locate the cultural valuations which make women appear 'closer to nature'(Moore: 2002).

It is important to note that the categories 'nature' and 'culture' themselves are cultural constructs in exactly the same way as the categories 'man' and 'woman'. The notions of nature and culture, as they are used in anthropological analysis, derive from western society, and as such, they are the products of a particular intellectual tradition and specific historical situation. Just as we cannot assume that the categories 'man' and 'woman' everywhere mean the same, so we must also be aware that other societies might not even perceive nature and culture as distinct and opposed categories in the way that western culture does. Furthermore, even where such distinction exists we must not assume that the western terms nature/culture are adequate or reasonable translations of the categories other cultures perceive (Moore: 2002). Moore's statement is true particularly in the case of tribal societies of Assam or Northeast India which do not recognize nature and culture as 'opposed categories'; they perceive themselves as one with nature.

What is paradoxical in this association of women with nature as an explanation for a lower status for women is that French historian Amaury de Reincourt in his book *Women and Power in History* (1989) used this association to explain the worship of womanhood (Mother Earth) in prehistoric times, which he entitles as *The Rise and Fall of the Great Mother*. Reincourt analyses

the distinction between man and woman from pre-history to modern times of several cultures. He explains that the male stood in awe of the female just as he did in front of all other natural phenomena—storm, lightening, earthquake, volcanic eruptions, etc. He described the primitive man as weak and relatively incapable of defending himself, more or less isolated in small, scattered groups, yet increasingly capable of abstract thought. The primitive man was afraid of nature's mysterious power, including the mysteries of 'menstrual cycle ... the magical birth of new life'. The primitive man saw an intricate connection between the woman's menstrual cycle and the phases of the moon or the movements of the tide. These factors made woman form part of those forces of nature that he did not understand and feared and, hence, recognized the woman as an intermediary, not only between man and man but also between man and nature. Reincourt describes that this awe and fear, unknown earlier, must have been generated by an increase in knowledge and understanding, implying a significant progress of self-consciousness, the rapid development of a new awareness and a feeling of reverence for human life and its transmission. He writes: '[S]ymbolic thought emerged, that is when thoughts and experiences were crystallized, reproduced, and preserved in artefacts, the very beginning of artistic expression'(Reincourt:1989).

Hence in the early Palaeolithic period, archaeological evidence revealed the worship of female statuettes, Mother Earth, in her various guises, in Spain, Arctic Tundra, Mexico, Austria, France, Germany, Russia, illustrating fertility magic. But slowly and gradually with the change in climate and way of life, created by a new hunting game, there was a consequent decrease in the importance and influence of women and the cult of the Mother Goddess, giving way to animal-oriented magic cults and the shaman, who is a medicine man who applies a psychoanalytic cure to organic or psychosomatic ailments. In this new hunting world, the masculine psyche remained predominant until the close of the Bronze Age. While the male ethos came to dominate completely in the northern plains stretching from Spain to central Russia, another type of primitive culture developed further south stretching from East Africa, Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia all the way to India and Southeast Asia. Here an entirely different social religious structure prevailed, initiated by the transition from hunting and food gathering to cultivation. In these economies, women are the main food producers, besides being the child bearers and hence all magico-religious powers were theirs. The Great Mother or Mother Goddess cult prevailed (Reincourt: 1989).

From about 10,000 to 5,000 BC, Neolithic cultures emerged. Domestication of animals led to a mixed barnyard economy in which grain agriculture (wheat and barley) and stock-breeding (sheep, oxen, pigs, goats,

etc.) complemented each other. Based on this increased affluence, human skills progressed: carpentry, house building, weaving and pottery. Farming altered from plot cultivation by women with hoes to agriculture by men with heavy ploughs pulled by harnessed oxen. This apparently was the point of time in history when masculine power, at the physical level, happened to project superiority over women's physical strength, and with the progress of technology ,the heavy equipment were all subsequently handled by men. This marks the beginning of the sense of control and power of men over women in economy and later, practically at all levels (Reincourt: 1989). The foundations of the old matrilinear, 'mother-right' kinship structure were shaken to the ground by the Neolithic Revolution. Technical inventions such as the harnessing of domesticated animals, the sail, the wheel and the potter's wheel, the discovery of irrigation and the subsequent food surplus which sustained elaborate and complex societies led to the growth of proto-urban sites. In India, the Harappan culture dominated by the Mother Goddess Cult was followed by the so-called second urbanization of the Aryans and with it we find the development of the patriarchal system and the consequent subordination of women. However, it may be mentioned that the prevalence of the Mother Goddess cult need not suggest a high position for women. Irfan Habib has shown that the Indus society was highly differentiated and that women were underprivileged on the basis of dental studies of the Harappa skeletons and other finds (Habib: 2002).

Reincourt describes the downfall of the Great Mother or the feminine principle as being systematically degraded, as if in revenge for its former predominance. He states, 'The downfall of the Great Mother some 3,000 to 4,000 years ago was a psychological event of the first magnitude.' He explains that it took place in the collective unconsciousness of these early cultures and shaped the relationship of the sexes in such a way as to assure the complete dominance of men or the masculine principle. For example, when man became fully aware, in a rational sense, of his biological role in the process of creating new life, 'he must have completely re-evaluated the importance of his part in conjugal life and came to the conclusion that, through this knowledge, he was , in fact, in full control of the fate of woman' (Reincourt: 1989). Thus, the origin of man's control over woman is to be initially traced to the change and progress of knowledge and technology, and the development of ideas of self-consciousness, which later took on different cultural dimensions. Such are the historical roots, the genesis of the subordination of women in society and the consequent historical amnesia, emerging out of patriarchy and the collective unconsciousness of our cultures. Patriarchy, as a value system, has greatly influenced

the writing of history and gender history still remains in the periphery of mainstream history.

One of the most fundamental contributions of feminist scholarship has been not merely to make any historical analysis more comprehensive by including the experiences of women but that such an approach has revolutionized the writing of history by critiquing existing knowledge with new questions. Sen emphasized an essential questioning of the traditional subservient role of women rather than a passive acceptance of the inequalities that exist. Amartya Sen in his lecture entitled 'Reason before Identity', at the University of Oxford, in 1998 stated:

> [T]raditional inequalities such as unequal treatment of women ... often survive by making respective identities, which may include subservient roles of the traditional underdog, matters for unquestioning acceptance, rather than reflective examination. But the unquestioned presumptions are merely unquestioned—not unquestionable. (Sen: 1999)

Social and institutional constructs around what is male and female will always vary, but are not necessarily unequal in value. In order to overcome gender discrimination, it is important to identify the inequalities that may exist and at the same time discuss policy options for reducing that inequality. This would help, Loutfi remarks, to discover ways of transcending the legacy of 'gender wars' and the natural limitations of purely feminist enquiry and male reactions to arrive at reintegration at a higher level (Loutfi: 2002). However, the current academic discourse is based on the concern that a focus on 'gender' rather than on 'women' would undo whatever effort was made to bring women and their standpoints to the forefront of research and knowledge production. Some scholars fear that the concept of gender neglects sexual and emotional differences between men and women, while for psychoanalysts, 'the concept of gender is too sociological and may obscure the centrality of the sexed body for understanding our culture'. Still others strongly believe that gender may 'water down the powerful concept of patriarchy as the source of women's oppression. [And also that] Patriarchy ... is much more encompassing than gender' (Davis: 2006). Nevertheless it remains that gender studies, the evaluation of the lives of both men and women, can be achieved only through the process of retrieving the woman into the pages of history!

Most historical analysis about social change—revolts, movements or organizations—are totally gender absent. They do not take cognizance of the role played by women in bringing about these changes. Women, so to say, were 'hidden from history.'[5] Feminist scholarship since the 1960s sought to

render women's experience and gender differences visible which so long were ignored or considered irrelevant to any social analysis and gender became the central concern of recent social science research. Such an approach has a two-way impact: the inclusion of women into history leads to a holistic social or historical analysis on one hand and, at the same time, gender has emerged as a powerful tool for such analysis by posing many new questions, as well as questioning pre-existing 'knowledge' derived from established, taken-for-granted views (Moore: 2002).

Writings on Women in India and Assam

Over the last four decades, various theories have been formulated and diverse research on women's lived experiences have been undertaken. This intellectual exercise has crossed all geographical boundaries and is no longer confined to Europe or America. In India, this exercise has been carried out largely by women, both Indian and foreign, like Malvika Karlekar, Nivedita Menon, Vandana Shiva, Sumi Krishna, Nandita Shah, Neera Desai, AR Desai, Flavia Agnes, Susan Faludi, Mary John, Geraldine Forbes, Maria Mies, Gail Omvedt, Radha Kumar, Nandita Gandhi, Uma Chakravarti, Tanika Sarkar, Veena Poonacha, Madhu Kishwar, Lata Mani, Kumkum Roy, Kumkum Sangari, to name a few. Some of the male writers on women are Partha Chatterjee, Amartya Sen, AS Altekar, Sudesh Vaid, Ashis Nandy, Vijay Agnew and others, who have made remarkable contribution in this field. However, books on women in Indian society written by renowned feminists have never included women from Assam into their analysis. In the region a few books on women have been published but most writings lack interpretation and analysis. *Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle* by Dipti Sharma is a detailed empirical study on women's participation in the national struggle for freedom. SL Baruah's (ed) *Status of Women in Assam (with Special Reference to Non-Tribal Societies),* which includes 17 papers, and Renu Debi's (ed) *Women of Assam* are proceeding volumes of different seminars. Aparna Mahanta's *Journey of Assamese Women, 1836–1937* is an interesting book covering discourses on women's education in the19th and 20th centuries as well as on women writers of the early 20th century.

Apart from these books, research papers presented at the Northeast India History Association (NEIHA), a regional forum for historians and practicing scholars of the region, founded in 1979 with its first session in 1980, have been reviewed by the author and it was marked by a conspicuous absence of

any focus on the woman in the first decade of its existence. The second decade definitely manifests that even though unaware of the growth of women's studies elsewhere, an attempt towards the writing of women's history had never been lost in the region especially because of certain peculiar features inherent in the varied societies of the region: first, the matrilineal societies of the Khasis and Syntengs or Jaintias have automatically diverted the attention of scholars to such a perspective; second, the domination of the Manipuri women in the economy of the state, making serious impact on society and politics, has led scholars to attempt the writing of history from this perspective. Statistics show that of the 30 sessions reviewed, a total of 63 papers were related to women's history; critiquing women's history begins from the 21st century onwards. The need for a theoretical framework or methodology in writing women's history was emphasized by Manorama Sharma time and again at the different sessions (Sharma: 1999, 2001, 2006). From the 24th Session, that is, 2003 to 2009, in a period of seven years, there have been a total of 44 papers on women, which implies a remarkable growth of interest on women's history.

While the need for legitimate feminist enquiry may be emphasized, gender analysis requires serious attention. MF Loutfi maintains that it is appropriate to seek equality between men and women and gender equality, with the latter implying that even if roles were different, men and women are equal in status and social esteem. She points out that gender inequality need not always be detrimental to women (Loutfi: 2002). The important point in writing women's history is to critique the existing knowledge and institutions. An ideal gender-neutral analysis is definitely a far cry, which can be arrived at only after reinstating the women in history through the discovery of sources, and usage of feminist research methods and methodology which will be discussed in the conclusion.

In Northeast India women's studies is still an almost virgin field, given the class, caste, ethnic variations of patriarchies and matrilineal societies. This establishes the rationale for this book: to highlight important areas of research in this field. The book intends to draw feminist and historical scholarship of the northeastern region of India into serious research on women or gender studies. Besides generating new ideas for research, other objectives are to fill up the lacuna of the 'missing gender' to some extent, facilitating the process of writing the women back into the history of Assam and explain historical change by analysing the processes of interaction, domination and oppression within the power structure of a patriarchal society, economy and politics. Most importantly, the book intends to study the impact of colonialism on women and women as agents of change, looking upon the colonial period as

a transitional phase, when the process of the formation of women's 'agency' set in, slowly and gradually. This book also elicits a better understanding of the problems related to contemporary society by creating an awareness to gender differentiation and facilitating social change. This adds a pragmatic dimension to the writing of the book.

Notes and References

Notes

1. Chevalier wrote: 'A messenger of the court came along with about thirty large boats belonging to the king ... the people I had brought with me from Bengal were sent back... only three were given permission to enter.'
2. The Ahoms were an offshoot of the Tai or Shan race from Southeast Asia, who migrated into the Brahmaputra Valley in the early 13th century and ruled Assam for 600 years thereafter.
3. For details see David Glover and Cora Kaplan (2001, pp. ix–xxxiv).
4. In India, we have varied cultures—a male-dominated North and South Indian culture (though matrilineal societies also exist in Kerala) on the one hand, and a somewhat liberal tribal and Assamese culture on the other, within different patriarchal systems in the Northeast. Feminist writers have identified male dominance even in the matrilineal *Khadduh* system of the Khasis of Meghalaya in Northeast India.
5. This phrase, coined in the 1970s by Sheila Rowbotham, is usually regarded as the catalyst for growth on the history of women.

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Women and Society

'Women and Society' includes three sections, that is, 'Retrieving the Woman in Assam', 'Woman Writers of Assam' and 'A Gender Perspective of the Text on the Skin in Northeast India'. The first, 'Retrieving the Woman in Assam', traces the portrayal of the woman in myths, legends and historical writings, and her subsequent growth of consciousness through changes in the economy as well as their active participation in the national struggle for Independence and regional mass movements, emerging as agents of change. Most works were written by men and women of the upper caste of Hindu society who had access to education. Societies of the ethnic or other marginalized groups were never considered important and were generally described as societies with low moral values by most colonial writers. 'Woman Writers of Assam' addresses the ideas and beliefs of women writers such as Nalinibala Devi, Chandraprova Saikia and others and attempts to identify gender issues therein. The inclusion of the section on 'A Gender Perspective of the Text on the Skin in Northeast India' is to bring into prominence the socially excluded ethnic groups of the wider society, and also to provide an example as to how women's history can be elicited from social practices such as tattooing.

Retrieving the Woman in Assam

An attempt to retrieve the woman in Assam, of the Brahmaputra Valley in particular, in a historical perspective, from the pages of history, should be based on an understanding of gender as a system of social relations within the framework of boundaries, negotiation/domination and consciousness (Gerson and Peiss: 2004) and which is constantly being influenced by various social, economic, cultural and political forces of the prevailing milieu. This approach would explain, to some extent, the transition of the Assamese woman, tribal and non-tribal, in terms of her social and economic status in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial times. It must be noted that such a broad study, however, does not reveal the underlying complex gender relations of the social structure of the various communities; each society or

culture will have to be critiqued separately but within the social and historical context of the society at large.

In Myths and Legends

Myths and legends are said to represent 'the self-image of a given culture, expressing its social assumptions' and are imagined or assumed to have happened, and 'time is almost proto-chronos since it involves gods and the supernatural in an active role with humans and animals', and used by those aspiring to and legitimizing power as a means to establish lineages (Thapar: 1993). It is, therefore, important to know briefly how the woman is depicted in the myths and legends of Assam. Such an understanding may, to some extent, be significant for the historical reconstruction of the woman in Assam. In a mythical legend on the life of King Naraka, as mentioned in the *Kalika Purana*, the power relations of the two sexes, the concept of negotiation/domination, as well as the separate spheres, are explicit. It is interesting that the *Kalika Purana* is said to have been largely composed around the 10th or the first half of the 11th century CE (Barpujari: 1990), and its author narrated Naraka's life throughout the two ages of the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata (*Kakati: 1989). The myth which became entrenched in the later legends and incorporated in the epics suggests a patriarchal society with delineated 'separate spheres' wherein the woman is assigned to the domestic realm and man to the public.

The woman is represented as Mother Earth associated with the role of reproduction and involvement with the rearing of children, as Katyayani, and goddess Kamakhya, associated with the fertility cult and 'divine powers'. This representation suggests gestation and childbirth as the natural manifestations of the creative power, the reason why, as discussed by Amaury de Reincourt, the primitive man looked at women as part of those forces of nature that he feared and did not understand (de Reincourt: 1989). The Naraka myth runs that Mother Earth had conceived Naraka through Vishnu, but was powered by gods like Brahma and others so that she might not deliver the child till Ravana was killed and the world was free of his misdeeds. Male domination is apparent in the powers of Brahma who is said to have controlled the time of the delivery of the child. This also makes Naraka contemporaneous with the events of the epic, Ramayana. One also sees the process of negotiation when Mother Earth selects the place of birth for Naraka in the land of King Janaka, delivers the child and lives there for 16 years.

During this period, Mother Earth impersonated herself as a nurse, Katyayani, and brought Naraka up. Naraka excelled the royal princes in martial arts and this made Janaka apprehensive that the former might usurp the throne. Katyayani became aware of this fear and decided to embark on a pilgrimage with Naraka as her escort. The two went to the Ganges where Naraka met his real father, Vishnu, for the first time and they came by water to Pragjyotisha. Naraka conquered the land from the Kiratas and was installed as king by Vishnu, and was placed in charge of goddess Kamakhya. It may be noted here that the independent goddess now needs to be under the protection of a male god. However, he is said to have received a *vaisnavatra*, a Vishnu weapon from Krishna by virtue of his mother's prayer, symbolic of feminine power, and *visnusakti* from Vishnu himself. *Visnusakti* implies a weapon as well as the divine energy as embodied in the female deity of goddess Kamakhya. This myth is deeply embedded in the legends related to the early life of Naraka, and rulers of Kamrupa tried to trace their descent from Naraka so as to legitimize their rule (Kakati: 1989). In this legend the woman is infused with great divine power and plays a significant role in decision-making with a political bent that later rulers tried to associate with.

The depiction of the woman in these myths and legends is particularly interesting especially when one relates it to the concept of Shakti in Hinduism, in which the female power principle is dominant. In understanding the various societies in Assam, it should be noted that the Mother Goddess cult evolved over time from an independent and powerful deity to become a consort and mother. Indigenous independent tribal goddesses, such as Tara, too became represented as a consort in the brahmanical patriarchal pantheon of gods. For example, in Eastern India, the independent Mahishamardini was later depicted as a consort of Shiva, as forms of Gauri such as Parvati, Uma and Lalita and then as a mother where the goddess is flanked by her two children, Ganesha and Kartikeya in the Deopani sculpture of Assam. Again, Deopani images of Kali earlier depict the goddess as independent but later as a consort of Shiva (Saraswati: 1990). The change in the depiction of the goddess corresponds to a change in gender relations in the society. Liddle and Joshi's (1986) historical analysis of female power in India reveals that female power is deeply rooted in history and is, therefore, strong and even seen as a threat to men. Unlike the situation in the West where the woman is looked upon as weak and has to be protected, male dominance over women in India, as Liddle and Joshi suggest, has been established by suppressing female power such as in the caste system and in the patriarchal family, which, according to them, is 'neither universal nor natural but has been the site of the struggle to restrain female power'. This is largely applicable

to an understanding of women's subordination in Assam. Liddle and Joshi argue that the historical analysis of the female power principle and the opposition to it embodied in the dominant male structures, particularly the patriarchal family, are crucial to an understanding of gender relations. Their historical analysis, based on the female power principle, provides a clue for 'a critical historicist reconstruction that engages dominant ideological forms'. They believe that the reconstruction of the history of female power closely relates to patriarchal family structure, religious practices and underlying ideologies (Liddle and Joshi: 1986).

The concept of Shakti with its cultural variant and social implications in Assam itself can be studied from a feminist viewpoint. SK Saraswati states that later Vedic texts—the Mahabharata, the *Harivamsa*, *Markandeya Purana*, particularly the *Devimahatmya* section, *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*, written not earlier than the 16th century (Barpujari:1990)—are authoritative works on the concept of Shakti or primordial energy symbolized in a woman. He describes this concept as a complex fusion of elements such as ideas of fertility and motherhood, drawn from various Aryan and aboriginal sources, which culminated in the concept of a supreme goddess represented as Durga or Devi in her many manifestations. The iconographic representation depicting her as an independent and powerful goddess, such as Durga Mahishasuramardini under the name of Katyayani in *Matsya Purana*, Ugrachanda in *Agni Purana* and *Bhavishya Purana*, was dominant for about three centuries, from the 9th to the 12th century in Assam (Saraswati: 1990). So the cult had strong historical roots in Assam and the evolution in the concept of Shakti corresponds to changes in the social structure at a particular historical phase. So research inquiry should be directed towards questioning the roots of this change.

Similarly, gender analysis of the combined representation of Shiva and Devi in the form of *linga* and *yoni* respectively, found extensively in Assam (Saraswati: 1990), and the concept of *Ardhanarisvara*, a composite iconographic representation of Shiva and his consort Uma-Parvati as detailed in the *Matysa Purana* could be meaningful. The surface appearance of such representation implies the concept of gender equality, a term often used to describe societies in Assam. However, feminists would point out that according to the text, in the image of *Ardhanarisvara*, the right half represents Shiva and the left, the goddess, as in the Khonamukh and Subhankarapataka grants of Dharmapala (1035–60). Moreover, in the grants, the initial stanza addresses the male god Shiva as *Ardhayuvatisvara* and not the goddess. This reveals a clear intention of reducing her independent status to a subordinate position as a consort, though author SK Saraswati would like to believe that

this unified form was an attempt towards a synthesis of two major cults of Hinduism, Shaivism and Shaktism (Saraswati: 1990). The concept of *Ardhanarisvara* in the case of Assam is a good example of the 'visibility' of female power. This is in line with the argument put forth by Liddle and Joshi that male dominance was consequent on a struggle in which the female power principle was accommodated into the patriarchal culture and yet remained visible. The dominant patriarchal brahmanical religious forms in Assam have become so invasive that they have exerted influence over tribal religious symbolism converting the once powerful and independent goddess to become controlled by her male partner.

A legend found in the chronicle of Kashmir, *Rajatarangini*, written by Kalhan and also in the account of the Chinese pilgrim Ou Kong, refers to Amritaprabha, the daughter of a king of Kamarupa who is said to have married Meghavahana, the ruler of Kashmir, through the *swayamvara* ceremony by which the prospective bride would garland the man she would choose. She is also said to have constructed a *vihara* for the Buddhist *bhikshus*, the ruins of which are seen at a distance of three miles from the capital, Srinagar known as Amrita Bhavan or Antabhavan. Bhuyan also states that the *Rajatarangini* mentions the conquest of *stri-rajya* (a women state), which some historians associate with the matrilineal society of the Khasis and the Jayantias of present Meghalaya (Bhuyan: 1965). This legend suggests that despite the distance in geography between the states of Assam and Kashmir, and poor means of communication, matrimonial alliances formed part of the political culture in those early days. It also indicates that women of the ruling class were accorded certain privileges such as choosing her husband through *swayamvara* or dedicating establishments to particular religious communities. Besides the legend of Amritaprabha, there are several myths and legends of Assam that could be analysed from the feminist standpoint, for example, the story of Chitralekha or the marriage of Rukmini, to name a few.

In Folk Tales

Again, most of the folk tales like *Tejimala, Burha–Burhir Sadhu, Tula Aru Teja* and others, folk songs, lullabies, *bihu-naam, Ai-naam* and other oral literature of the very early times have been carried over from generation to generation by women and could provide insight into gender relations. A variety of popular religious songs connected with goddess Ai, Lakhimi or Apeswari are sung mostly by women. Small pox was a dreaded disease in

early times as it led to several deaths. The people therefore began to worship the same as something powerful and in the form of 'goddess' named Ai (mother). It is interesting how disease become gendered too. Lakhimi symbolizes paddy and welfare, and Apeswari is a sort of fairy invoked in times of children's illness (Goswami: 1959). The association of economy and prosperity and that of diseases and their cure with the female goddesses imply great reverence and faith of the society on women as a whole, invested with responsibility and care, within the private sphere. So folktales and songs could be interesting areas of investigating women's position in the socio-economic structure.

The folk tradition of the Tai Phakes, a lesser-known Buddhist community of Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam, presents a subordinate social position of the woman. *Pu Son Lan* (advice from grandparents to grand children) is an exhaustive story-cum-maxim, in which there are advices to the grandsons: 'You should be in good relations with your wife; otherwise you will be in trouble'; 'Enemy is very close to you. You should not trust even your wife'; 'Women are of seven kinds. There are good and bad among these. Four are good. They do not even protest even if their husbands beat and three types (of women) are bad'. On the other hand, advice to the granddaughters include, 'Do not talk much'; 'Practice weaving always'; 'Always take care of your husband'; 'The husband is like a king. He should be honoured sincerely'; 'Please him with love and affection'; 'Do not disobey him' (Thakur: 1985). These maxims clearly point to the social and moral norms prevalent in the society that are largely male chauvinist and patriarchal.

In Precolonial History

The system of *devadasis* or virgin women consecrated to the temples existed in ancient Assam. The Copper Plate Grant of Vanamala mentioned that the king reconstructed the temple of Hataka Sulin at a place where the *vesyas* or public women lived. The same record, however, mentions *vesya-palli* and differentiates the *vesya* from the *natis* who were versed in the various arts of dancing. However, it cannot be ascertained as to whether the temple sculptures that show female figures playing musical instruments and dancing, represent women in general who are well-versed in these arts, or are portrayal of *devadasis* or the *natis* associated with the temples. The *Yogini Tantra* gives a detailed description of the *devadasis* of the sacred city of Apunarbhava, identified as Modern Hajo, where the temple of Hayagriva Mahadeva is

situated. The Census Report of 1901 mentions a class of people called *natas*, belonging to the *kalita* caste whose duty is to supply *devadasis* to the Shiva temples. In the Grant of Vanamala *varastris or devadasis* are described as entrusted with the duty of fanning the idol of the god with *camara* or Tibetan ox-tails (Barpujari: 1994). This class of women was perhaps originally a venerated group of women attendants employed at a young age to help in temple management, while some were trained in dancing for the sake of entertainment. However, as Romila Thapar has maintained in the case of the Chola temples,

> [T]he system (perhaps in Assam too, in a lesser degree) was abused, and eventually in many temples the *devadasis* degenerated into shamefully exploited prostitutes, their earnings being collected by the temple authorities.... The vast majority of women had to work, either in their homes or in the fields. (Thapar: 1966)

Jean-Baptiste Chevalier on writing on his travel to Assam (1755–57) wrote on the *devadasis* of Kamakhya thus: '[W]e have to give them [the *devadasis*] credit for the fact that they willingly share their pleasures with those who are tempted and who have the capacity to pay them' (Dutta-Baruah: 2008).

The precolonial Assamese society was largely patriarchal although some tribal societies like those of the Bodos and Dimasas represent matrilineal and matrilocal features as well. The inclusion of women as a significant component of the Assamese society in the historical writings of the period is therefore scant and almost negligible. Writing the woman back to the history of the precolonial period will have to be on the basis of the study of institutions such as marriage, sati, *devadasis*, the non-state legal structure, the economic system and, to some extent, folklore as well. Women in Assam contributed to the economy primarily by engaging themselves in the entire process of weaving since early times. It is of importance to note that weaving in Assam was not about merely providing for the household. It had economic, social and ideological implications as well. An interesting aspect related to weaving is the association of magical/divine power with the woman. Assamese warriors marched to the battlefield wearing a 'wonder-working and evil-averting *Kavach-Kapor*, or talisman cloth', the yarn of which must be spun and woven in the course of one single night. It is said that the Ahom general, Phrasengmung Bargohain, husband of Mula Gabharu, died in the battlefield as he did not wear this protective garment (Bhuyan: 1965). Herein lies the ideological significance of the role of women in political battles and warfare.

It is worth mentioning that the Ahom rulers refused to wear cloth that is not indigenous. Moreover, during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603–41), Momai Tamuli Barbarua, in undertaking the task of reorganizing the domestic, agricultural and social life of the people, toured the kingdom and promulgated an order that 'every capable woman should spin two copses of yarn, and every man should make a basket or a sieve before retiring to bed'. The next day he would find out and take note of the progress. Besides it was obligatory on the part of every Assamese household to contribute one seer of home-spun silk annually to the royal stores (Bhuyan: 1965).

Hence, it were the women who had to take the responsibility of meeting the demands of the home as well as of the state. This economic order of Pratap Singha shows that for economic production, practically equal responsibility is assigned to women, if not more, as this does not take into account the domestic work and the responsibility of reproduction, childbirth and child-rearing. Thus, while very often the woman in Assam crosses her boundary within the private sphere, the man, as the patriarch or perhaps due to the efficient management of the household by the women, hardly has the necessity to cross his boundary to enter the domestic realm. In some cases, Assamese men do cook the meals during the period of the woman's menstruation. However, the joint family system made such cases rare. During menstruation the woman is considered unclean and, therefore, not allowed to say her prayers or enter the kitchen and she has to sleep and eat separately; surprisingly, this custom is prevalent in some households even to this day. Despite their significant contribution to the economy of the household as well as to the state, the existence of such social taboos signifies the subordinate position of the woman in a patriarchal social structure.

Polygamy was practised in Assamese society. Shihabuddin Talish, the chronicler who accompanied Mir Jumla (1662–63), observed: 'The wives of the king and the populace never veil their faces before anybody, and they move about in the market-place with bare-heads [unveiled]. Most of the men have four or five wives'. Moreover, there have been several examples of feats of courage and gallantry on the part of women in battlefields (Bhuyan: 1965). In precolonial societies, a man's status in society and in the village councils was determined by the number of wives; the larger the number of wives the greater the influence.

Some social practices in Assam were and are still in favour of women; for example where it is the bridegroom who has to send ornaments and clothes to the bride before the actual marriage ceremony. This stands in contrast to the system of dowry prevalent in the rest of India. One such practice was the *joron diya*, in which the bridegroom would send gifts like ornaments,

clothes, sweets, fish, betelnut and coconut to the bride in eastern and central Assam. This practice is known as *tel bhardiya* in western Assam. *Gadhon* or bride price was a social practice prevalent in Assam and popular mostly in western Assam. The practice is found in the tribal societies of the plains with different nomenclature like *malsa* and *phon yhoka* among the Boros, *alig* among the Misings or Miris, *Kalti* among the Dimasas or Kacharis and other terms among the Koches, Tiwas or Lalungs and Rabhas. Surprisingly, unlike the other tribes, the Karbis do not have the system of bride price (Bordoloi et al.: 1987, Das: 2005). In tribal societies, the custom of bride price takes the form of a demand, sometimes in both cash and kind, by the parents of marriageable girls. If a young man or his guardian fails to fulfil the demand, the marriage negotiations either fail or the young man is given the option to serve for a year or two in the house of the girl in lieu of the cash and kind demands. Among the Boros, this system is defined as *garija lakhinai haba*, that is, marriage through servitude. Once the settlement of the marriage is made and a date for the ceremony is fixed, the bridegroom party goes to the bride's house where she is formally offered all the demands made, in the presence of the invited guests, thereby acquiring a social sanction for the marriage.

When the guardians fail to come to a marriage settlement, the couple sometimes agrees to elope or, in certain cases, the girl is abducted forcibly. In such circumstances, the consent and sanction of the community as well as of the guardians of both sides are to be obtained by holding a feast and formally announce the marriage. The young man stays in his father-in-law's house, either for a certain period or the entire life. This is known as the system of *gharjamai* or *chapaniya* (Barpujari: 1994, Das: 2005). The *saklang* system of marriage of the Ahom community is different from the mainstream Assamese marriages though a few rituals like *joron* are similar. Different nomenclature is used for the various types of marriages in the Boro society. *Hathachuni* refers to marriage through negotiation, *chawdang-jagarnay* or *garija lakhinai haba* for marriage by servitude and *dhoka* for widow remarriage. The Deories have four forms of marriages: *bor biya, maju biya, bhakat rupiya* or *saru biya* and *gandharba*. The classification is made on the basis of expenses involved, and this implies social inequality. *Bor Biya* (big wedding) implies greater expenses than *maju* (middle) or *saru* (small) *biya*, while *gandharba* is marriage by elopement (Bordoloi et al.: 1987). In Lakhimpur, a system called *burha biya* is prevalent. Sometimes there are instances when the couple elopes and no feast is conducted, and the couple lives together without any social sanction as such. They bear children and when their children are of a marriageable age, the old couple gets married to

remove the taboo of 'illegitimacy' from their children. This practice is known as *burha biya.* These social practices have an economic element in them. The woman before her marriage is an economic asset to the household in terms of maintenance, farming, weaving and child-rearing and acknowledged by all members of the society. So unlike the system of dowry where the girl child is considered a burden, the girl in Assam is regarded as an economic asset and so is taken away from her paternal house with respect and social sanction, while in some tribal societies, the bride could also make a formal demand on the groom. Perhaps no region in the world, and this could well be an important area of research, have as many different types of marriages as prevalent in this region.

However, the Brahmanical-Aryan customs followed by the upper castes of North India exercised strict control over women and their sexuality and this has impacted a comparatively low position for upper-caste women in comparison to those from the lower castes (Agnes: 1999). This impact was felt in societies all over India, and the same is true of Assam. This influence came with the process of migration of people from the rest of India to Assam. There were, however, only stray instances of the practice of sati or the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands in Assam. This was because the practice was associated only with upper-caste women and the caste system was not deeply entrenched in different societies. The practice is mentioned in Damodara Gupta's *Kuttanimatam* which states that the concubine of a king became a sati after his death. The *Yogini Tantra,* written around the 16th century, states that a Brahmin widow should be a sati after the death of her husband but it was optional for Vaisya and Shudra widows and totally prohibited for 'unchaste' women and those having many children (Barpujari: 1994). This statement itself shows that the practice was a later development in the state.

In Colonial History

It was on the women's question that the British tried to justify their rule in Assam, as in the rest of the country, and hence we find the *Orunodoi* (a monthly magazine on religion, science and general knowledge, printed and published by the Sibsagar Mission Press by Oliver T. Cutter for the American Baptist Mission in Assam) in its May 1846 Volume 1, mentioning such a case.

The short column 'Immolation of Women' began with a description of the practice as one in which Hindu women ascended the funeral pyre of their

husbands either on their own will or were forced by relatives, since widow remarriage was not prevalent. So ending their lives in flames met three goals. It meant the end of sorrow and hardship, the attainment of salvation and for the good of future generations. It also stated that sati as a ritual is mentioned in some Hindu shastras and absent in some. It glorified Bentinck for having described the practice as equivalent to suicide and putting a legal ban and for mentioning that intellectuals in Calcutta took to widow remarriage just as in Christian states. It also referred to a case of sati detected in Kalugaon village of Sibsagar, where the sister-in-law of a *mouzadar*, named Lambudor, wanted to become a 'sati'. Lambudor appealed to Christian authorities to prevent her from doing so. The act was prevented with the intervention of Daroga Dowerah (Neog: 2008). The representation of the case is done very carefully to reveal the British as 'the saviour' of the race. These cases are generally very few and unknown and it related mostly to the upper classes. In fact the system of widow remarriage was common among all classes of the population except for a few higher caste Hindus. The *mitakshara* system, based on Vijnanesara's commentary on the *Yajnavalkya Samhita*, was followed in Assam, which practically sanctions widow remarriage (Barpujari: 1994).

Islamic law in Assam is largely influenced by the local Hindu social customs of the province, and women's space within the *Shariat* law, is apparent in the right to stipulated *mehr* (a mandatory amount of money or possessions, paid by the groom to the bride at the time of marriage) for her exclusive use., which in Assam is also known as *maharana*, as a safeguard to the woman. Thus the practice of *joron* before marriage is prevalent among the Muslim community in certain parts of Assam. The practice of cross-cousin marriage, though approved by Islamic laws, is not encouraged among Assamese Muslims. These local customary laws and practices present liberal social relations within a patriarchal structure. This liberal social attitude is generally depicted by historians as 'a higher social status of women in Assam' compared to the rest of India. These practices and customary laws also indicate the processes of domination and negotiation within the system of marriage.

Weaving in Assam continued to be a recognized social as well as economic skill in the colonial period. While Hem Barua stated that 'weaving constitutes the most essential part of a girl's education, and the lack of it does her discredit' (Barua: 1954), SK Bhuyan says that 'a knowledge of weaving is an essential qualification for her, while proficiency in the art ensures for her a ready disposal in the matrimonial market' (Barpujari: 1994). Weaving is, therefore, not merely a vocational education but has social implications as well; an expertise in the art makes the girl most eligible for marriage. Bhuyan (1965) states that the economic support of the young Assamese woman to

her family does not make her 'a *financial burden* to her parents' (emphasis mine), should there be a delay in her marriage. However, usage of terms like 'financial burden' or his remark that such women are 'a ready disposal in the matrimonial market' portrays the woman as 'a commodity'. The woman in Assam ensures economic stability to her parents in her childhood and teenage years, and later to her in-laws as she attains maturity and is capable of shouldering the responsibility of the entire family in case of eventualities.

In the colonial period, the practice continued with renewed vigour as it enabled a man to control more land and labour through bride price. Additional wives meant additional field workers who facilitated the process of accumulation. In this process women's control over the economy declined. As the possibilities of capital accumulation multiply, as maintained by Benenia and Sen (1997), women began to have only partial control over the product of their labour (Visvanathan: 1997). The origin of women's subordination is linked to this economic process with the introduction of private property in the means of production and the need to pass it on from one generation to the next, 'with reproduction, that is with the need to identify paternity of heirs through the institution of the family and the control of the women's sexuality and reproductive activities' (Visvanathan: 1997). This process of accumulation led to a change in gender relations effecting women's subordination on one hand and at the same time increased the responsibility for reproduction on the other. Again, women's economic activities explain some of the complexities of the household economy within the broader economic system, in which male dominance is clearly evident. The Census Reports of 1891, 1901, 1921 and 1931 are significant official records of woman's contribution to the state economy which will be discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter on 'Women and Economy'. It may be mentioned here that official statistics under-report all subsistence activities, particularly domestic work and participation in field cultivation, which were carried out largely by women.

Though very vague and generalized, colonial writers had interesting impressions about Assamese women. In 1831, Adam White wrote that women of Assam were less educated than their male counterparts, though people were open to education for girls. He states that the degraded position of women in Assam is a 'common-place exaggeration' as he pointed out that they exerted considerable influence in domestic affairs as their counterparts in other parts of the world. They participate in scientific or theological discussions and although they may not know how to play the piano, 'yet who shall deny her the praise of fulfilling some share of women's mission ... of pleasing her husband and cherishing her children' (White: 1831[1988])?

Curiously enough, foreign writers do not tend to depict a very favourable picture of women in Assam.[1] In 1837, John M'Cosh, a surgeon by profession, writes on low moral values: 'A mother thinks no more of contracting for the person of her daughter, than for a duck or chicken, or renting it [*sic*] at a fixed sum per month' (M'Cosh: 2000). He further remarks: 'The women come in for a large share of suspicion; indeed they are believed to be enchantresses, and the influence of their personal beauty is very unfairly attributed to their skill in the magic art' (M'Cosh: 2000). Almost a decade later, Mill (1854) stated that compared to the rest of India, in Assam 'the bonds of matrimony [are] ... unscrupulously violated, or connubial relation ... little regarded'. While White emphasizes on the proficiency of the Assamese woman in theology, science and fulfilment of her duty 'as a wife', M'Cosh's statement suggests the association of the woman with magical powers.

However, the low moral values that Chevalier or M'Cosh writes about are confusing as to which community or place they are referring to as 'Assam' given the difficult topography of the region, the various communities—tribal and non-tribal—and where language is a great barrier. The generalization of the description under the heading of 'Assamese Women' is erroneous or, as White (1831 [1938]) suggests, is 'a common-place exaggeration'.

The above references are not surprising as colonial writers do have a tendency of exaggerating the so-called 'low morality' and 'low status' of the woman belonging to the so-called 'savage' and 'barbaric' societies of the east to fulfil their 'civilizing mission'. The women's question and education formed the basis of the justification of their rule. The advent of colonialism made its impact explicit in society, education, economy and legal administration. Regardless of the precolonial status of women in Assamese society, the tendency of the colonial administration was to impose traditional 'male' Western values regarding the 'proper' roles of men and women as perceived by the colonial administrators, who were male themselves, in accordance with 'dominant values ... associated with the Victorian era in England' (Viswanathan: 1997). For example, the education introduced by the catholic missionaries, particularly in the hill areas, Shillong being the capital of Assam, made a clear segregation of the domains of the 'girl' and the 'boy', which would later be carried over to their specific private/public spheres. The missionaries of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission faced tremendous problems, such as the taboos associated with the education of girls who were made to learn sewing, knitting and other handworks (Passah: 2001). The German Salvatorian missionaries came to the Northeast in 1890 and for about 25 years, worked relentlessly towards the process of evangelization and education. Besides the introduction of elementary schools, the Salvatorian

sisters established two home science schools to 'import practical instruction', where various household skills such as cooking, washing, ironing, stitching, knitting, embroidery, weaving and lace-work were taught to girls. For the training of boys, they opened an agricultural school, a handicrafts school with various trades, including the making of the silk thread and gardening (Deka: 2007a). Such education only reinforced the stereotyped roles for men and women.

Social practices like *gadhon* were often misrepresented in colonial historiography, such as that depicted in the *Orunodoi* as 'a custom of trading in girls'. Although Misra states that the 'sinful' and 'scandalous' social practice was removed with the 'progressive and modern' ideas introduced by the coming of colonialism (Misra: 2007), it still survives in some communities and it may be stated that the misrepresentation of *gadhon* as a custom of trade was, in actuality, intentional. It was once again to justify British rule on grounds of their moral responsibility of the so-called 'white man's burden'. Srinivas stated that this custom, which is practised mostly by the lower castes, and even by Brahmins, was 'a compensation for the loss effected by the marriage of a daughter (Srinivas: 1986). Although Srinivas did not make this observation in the case of Assam, he was not explicit about the nature of such loss, whether it was a psychological or an economic loss. The idea behind the practice in Assam is in reality an economic transaction, an equivalent or a replacement of the woman as an 'economic asset' in the Assamese household.

It is important to look into the attitudes and beliefs of individual women and men of the 19th century to understand social change. A few intellectuals such as Anandaram Dhekialphukan, Hem Chandra Barua and, particularly, Gunabhiram Barua, deeply influenced by the reformist fervour in Bengal, the ideas of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, fought for women's equal rights. They displayed their concern through practical examples. While Gunabhiram Barua married a widow with two children, Hemchandra Barua never got married after his wife's death, stating that had it been otherwise, his wife would have been treated as an outcaste of the society, which to him is unreasonable and unjust (Misra: 2007). What needs emphasis here is the fact that the colonial representation of Indian society as inferior to that of the West was on the basis of its treatment to women. Hence, intellectuals like Gunabhiram Barua emphatically stated that any judgment on social issues should be based on reason. To refute the colonial understanding of Indian society and to strengthen his point that Indian tradition as represented in the religious scriptures does not justify the cruel treatment of women, he compared a man's control over his wife as that over cattle that one buys in the market and this, in itself, is total injustice towards women. He wrote,

'In this matter, let me refer to what is written in the *Manusamhita* because no other *shastra* can prove this point more clearly' (Misra: 2007).

As a result, awareness of women's rights in the 19th and 20th centuries was created in Assamese society to a large extent through the writings of such men in *Mou*, the *Orunodoi*, in biographies and autobiographies and through plays such as *Ramnabami Natak*, on the one hand, and through the very lives of these men who espoused the women's cause on the other. This awareness also spread slowly and steadily through organizations such as the Dibrugarh Mahila, Samiti formed as early as 1915, and the subsequent Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, founded in 1926, whose branches were soon established in different parts of the state (Deka: 2007b). Around this time with the beginning of the *Orunodoi*, Western women such as Eliza Whitney Brown, Harriet BL Cutter, Emily Goldsmith and others, who came to Assam as wives of missionaries, travellers or government officers, set the trend as 'women writers' in the region by writing stories, experiences and biographies. Very soon Assamese women namely Tarini Devi, Vishnupriya Devi, Padmavati Devi Phookan and others followed suit. Their writings, however, were not on the theme of women's emancipation but rather focused on the rights, duties, moral and social values. Nevertheless this in itself was a force of change.

In Post-1947 History

The period following India's independence has seen tremendous, though slow, changes taking place in the political structure, society and economy as well, where the woman, both rural and urban, is an active agent, a catalyst of that process of change, particularly since the 1970s, when she began to consciously move into the 'public' sphere of decision-making bodies. There were women ministers, *mouzadar*s and the like making conspicuous invasion into male bastions. Moreover, India's policy of liberalization boosted further migration of all sections of people, traders, service-holders, merchants' labour and others, in large numbers into the state from all parts of India, and with this influx, erosion of tradition and social customs began, and are still continuing to change. This social change is effected by the Brahmanical–Aryan customs of West and North India, in particular. The Ganesh cult has suddenly come to the forefront, thereby indicating the rapid growth of materialism. North Indian marriage rituals and customs like *sangeet*, *mehendi* and even dowry have become almost an integral part of marriage systems in Assam,

sometimes through intercommunity marriages and sometimes as a strong influence of a coexisting community, while traditions like singing *biya naam* (songs sung while the marriage ceremony is carried out), *panitola* (fetching of bathing water from a river for the bride or groom) are becoming obsolete. Of late, dowry deaths have been on the rise, and the demand for dowry has become a new problem even among some of the Assamese communities. In fact, the spate of liberalization and consumerism in the postcolonial period has changed lifestyles enormously, both in the urban centres and in the rural areas. It has diminished the rural–urban gap in many ways; the geographical expansion and encroachment of urban and city centres into rural areas is another important factor. Most women work in offices and in non-governmental organizations. A welcome change is women working as entrepreneurs with various ideas as opening of weaving centres, schools, boutiques, beauty parlours, fast-food joints, floating restaurants, nurseries, pathological laboratories, food processing, jute handicrafts and the like. Such significant contributions have empowered the woman and have decisively been promoting her social status.

A look into the lives of a few rural women, basically domestic helpers, reveal a tendency of low-income groups to leave their villages and settle in towns, although they keep in touch with their roots in the villages, which, in a sense, explains their insecurity in the towns as well as the idea of having the best of the two worlds. Amina Begum, for example, is about 45 years old from a village called Otola, near Baihata Chariali. Her father was a daily wage earner, and her mother would weave for the family, cook, wash dishes and clothes, help in rice cultivation, and look after a kitchen garden, rear goats for others, so that she may get one from the litter. She said that her mother did not require to weave more than what the family required. The wives of her three brothers, besides the chores, taking care of the children and sending them to school, began to weave clothes for the market, an idea they got, 'from their neighbours'; weaving in general was a profession chiefly associated with women (interview on 4 August 2007 with Amina Begum, a household helper).

Amina was married to a domestic helper in Golaghat, who opened a tea shop, where she helped him to make and serve tea. She has two daughters and one son. He however died of gastric ulcer, and since the children were young, she married again. The new husband stayed with her for ten years but deserted her. She, perforce, had to become a domestic helper to support her children's education. Her two daughters now work in a beauty parlour, while her son is an electrician. Amina works in about seven houses as a part-timer, and earns around ₹2,300, while her daughters, who do not

live with her now, earn ₹4,000, of which they give ₹800 to ₹1,000 and her son earns ₹1,000. This amount of money has helped her to live comfortably in a rented house with electricity, a gas stove, a fan and she even bought a fridge for ₹1,000. She saved money and bought a small piece of land (one katha) of land in the village where she grows bamboo and lemon, and sells them occasionally. She said that all the major decisions such as buying land, sending children to school, and allowing them to discontinue, were her decisions. She now runs a poultry farm in her village. This is a case that is representative of such very low-income social groups existing in the society, where one can clearly see the woman as the agent of change, and how, within a few decades, change in lifestyles become evident. There has been a general tendency among such people to abandon rural life and adjust in the city through supplementary income by other means such as selling tea, buns, local snacks, roast corn or vegetables by the roadside.

Side by side such transformation, legal awareness continued to grow even at the grassroots and became institutionalized with the foundation of the *Nari Mukti Santha* in 1979 and the Women's Legal Aid Cell, 10 years later, in 1989 (Legal Aid Cell: 1995). Interestingly enough, after the peasant struggles in Sibsagar which were organized by the *Khetiak Santha* and the CPI(ML) (Santosh Rana Group), in 1979, the *Nari Mukti Santha*, Assam, a mass women's organization of landless and small and middle peasants, based on the Leninist model, was set up to spread the message of communism and women's rights (Gandhi and Shah: 1999). The Assam Agitation (1979–85) saw a remarkable participation of women of all classes and ages. Following this agitation, the *All Jorhat Sangrami Mahila Samaj*, which initially began as the women's wing of the movement was established to play an active role in fighting for the rights of women, particularly of the deprived and underprivileged sections of the society.

Finally, an understanding of women's subordination in Assamese society may be deduced from developments in history, well rooted in the myths, legends and religious forms. Male dominance has been established by suppressing female power such as in the caste system and in the patriarchal family, which, as Liddle and Joshi maintain, is 'the site of the struggle to restrain female power' (Liddle and Joshi: 1986). A historical analysis of the female power principle, the underlying ideologies and its suppression in the dominant male social and economic structures are crucial to an understanding of gender relations (Liddle and Joshi: 1986). Further transformation took place, particularly in the colonial times marking a change simultaneously in gender relations and the transition of the woman in Assam. In the new colonial economy, changes in the agrarian societies of

Assam were very subtle but, nevertheless, they impacted a change in gender relations and women's subordination. This subordination is apparent even in the so-called 'liberal' tribal societies of the Boros, Tiwas or Lalungs and Rabhas where even the household structures designed by men delineate her confinement to only specific areas of the household taking such factors into account as the privacy or chastity of the woman, easy access to the kitchen, the loom and the granary (Bordoloi et al.: 1987). However, the woman in general, though still subordinated in the social structure, underwent processes of awareness, consciousness, and multidimensional interaction of various forces including the political experience in the national struggle for Independence and regional mass movements on the Foreigners'(Immigration) Issue in the post-Independence era. This helped women play a catalytic role in bringing about change, and not being mere passive recipients of the process of modernization. The agency aspect has been the outcome of these varied social forces and the change in gender relations.

Women Writers of Assam

The intellectual and social milieu of the colonial period influenced women writers and vice versa, and this reciprocative process enabled the women to struggle for emancipation and change. A historical perspective reveals the change in the genre of literature alongside the changing patterns of patriarchy or rather, patriarchies, and gender relations itself among the various communities from the precolonial, through the colonial and onto the post-Independence period of Assam very clearly. Patriarchy has evolved and transformed with time as did culture, society, economy and the state. The gradual change in gender relations in post-Independence society effected through education and feminist influence is conspicuous through the writings of women writers.

Precolonial Period

In the precolonial period education and literature were the sole preserve of men, and women were not only denied any form of education but it was a social taboo for women to read or even touch the handwritten manuscripts or so-called *puthis* [2] kept safely with great reverence in

dhowa chang (Mahanta: 2008), shelves hung over the fireplace so that smoke would protect them from silverfish and other pests. What is curious here is the intrusion of the male dictate in the kitchen which apparently is the woman's only place in the household. The first Assamese women writers, perhaps Padmapriya, belonged to the 18th century, a time when there were very few women writers, not only in India, but in the rest of the world. Influenced by her father, Gopaldeo, a *satradhikar*[3], she wrote devotional poetry on lines with Sankaradeva's *bargeet*[4]. Her writings eulogized the preceptor as well as her father. Imbued with a strong sense of spirituality, she also wrote on the transient nature of life, sexual pleasure and materialism. Her writings reflect patriarchal domination, where the 'son, husband and wealth' occupy a predominant position in one's life. To quote:

> putra pati dhan sabe akàrana'jene jalabimbà hàse,
> ei àse ei nài sabe hobo sai sakàlo kàl garàse
> J'ibana yaubana sabe akàrana jene saponar nidhi
> Misà dukha lagi brahmaka tiyàgi nabhail kichui siddhi.
>
> [Son, husband and wealth are like reflections on the water
> Now here and now gone—time will reduce all to ashes
> Life and youth are like dreams;
> Sorrow and sacrifice are meaningless (Translation mine)].
> (Sarma: 2010)

Besides Padmapriya, there is reference to Kanaklata Ai who composed religious poems and plays belonging probably to the same century. SK Bhuyan mentions two queens of the Ahom King, Shiva Singha, as patrons of literature in the mid-18th century, which includes Sukumar's *Hastinavidyavarna*, a book on elephants, rather than writers themselves (Mahanta: 2008). Since then there has been no reference to other women writers of the time. In fact, Assamese literature was pushed into oblivion with the political instability, Burmese invasions and the takeover of the English East India Company by the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826.

Colonial Period

A decade later, in 1836, influenced by the clerks from Bengal who were brought along with the British administrative machinery, Bengali as a language replaced Assamese as the medium of instruction in the

schools of Assam. As such, men like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Hemchandra Baruah urged the need for a revival of the Assamese language, while simultaneously, American Baptist missionaries arrived in Assam and established the 'Shivasagar Mission' in 1841 and adopted the local language for the propagation of Christianity. They started the first printing press in 1846 and the first magazine, *Orunodoi*, in the Assamese language was printed. The magazine which was an assortment of world news, moral education, stories, history and geography were contributions of mostly male writers like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah, Hemchandra Baruah and others. Assamese women writers contributing to this magazine were not known. The magazine's noteworthy contribution to the women of Assam was that it focused on women's education, thereby creating a wedge to include women in the social sphere. However by 1860, its publication was irregular. During this period, 1836–60, many American and European women like Eliza Whitney Brown, Harriet BL Cutter, Mary F Lawrence, Susan Ward, Annie Goldsmith, Mary R Tollman, Emily Goldsmith, Suvarna Goldsmith and CF Tollman wrote textbooks, story books, biographies and dictionaries, which, as Mahanta writes, were not of high literary standards but such efforts 'broke the local taboo' against women writers and encouraged women to make similar attempts (Mahanta: 2008).

Through the efforts of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and others, Assamese was reinstated as the medium of instruction in the schools in 1873. While the following decade was dominated by the writings of Hemchandra and Gunabhiram Baruah, women writers emerged slowly. Assamese women writers of the colonial period, despite the hurdles of proper education and social subordination in a patriarchal system, have made a considerable and important contribution to Indian literature. The 19th century stimulated interest not only in the writing of literature and poetical narratives, but also in a questioning of the prevalent social norms, as an outcome of women's unique set of experiences, particularly among the upper-caste women of Assam. Mention may be made of Tarini Devi (1829–92), Vishnupriya Devi (1839–92), Padmavati Devi Phookan (1853–27), Swarnalata Devi Baruah (1871–32), Dharmeswari Devi Barua (1892–60), Jamuneswari Khatoniyar (1899–24) and Nalinibala Devi (1898–76). What contributed largely towards such a development was that these women writers belonged to families who were exposed to English education in schools and colleges of Calcutta, and were influenced by the cultural awakening of Calcutta of the time, and its subsequent repercussion in Assam. The repercussion, in part, took the form of revolutionary writings of men like Gunabhiram Barua

and Hem Chandra Sharma on women's issues, and using the *Orunodoi*, a contribution of the American Baptist Missionaries, as a platform to articulate the need for social change.

Tarini Devi received education from her father, Holiram Dhekial Phukan. Polygamy being prevalent in those times, she was also the stepsister of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. She tried to work towards women's education and continued writing in the *satra*[5] where she lived. Her book, entitled *Jakhalabandha Satragit*, included songs on Dolonjatra, Janmashtami, Maharas and Doljatra[6], with emphasis on devotion to God and spiritual development.

Both Vishnupriya Devi and Swarnalata Devi Baruah remarried after they became widows, a bold gesture against social injustice in those days, and both had the opportunity to stay in the Brahmo Samaj of Kolkata. We generally tend to laud Gunabhiram Baruah for marrying the widow, Vishnupriya Devi, for undertaking such a noble act as opposing and breaking social norms, but we seldom look at Vishnupriya as the progressive woman agreeing to such a marriage, and thereby being the agent of social change. This was the first civil marriage in Assam. Influenced by the ideology of the Brahmo Samaj, her first book, *Nitikatha*, was based on moral education for children. She also emphasized the need for women's education as the means to emancipation. Swarnalata Devi Baruah was the daughter of Gunabhiram and Vishnupriya. As was the custom in those days, she got married at a very young age and soon became a widow. Unfortunately, her parents and other family members too died and so the renowned writer, Lakshminath Bezbaroa took over the responsibility for the education of her younger brother and also got her married to Khirod Chandra Raichaudhuri, a writer. She wrote *Arhi Tirota* and contributed articles, inter alia, 'Karameti Bai', 'Prakrit Laj Ki', 'Yato Dharmastato Jayah' in periodicals like *Asam Bandhu* and *Jonaki* (Sarma: 2010).

Padmavati Devi Phukan,[7] daughter of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, wrote, what Dimbeswar Neog calls 'perhaps the first novel in the Assamese language', *Sudharmar Upakhyan*, published in 1884, though it did not fall into the genre of novels. The author highlighted social problems and gender relations between Sudharma, Lilavati and their husbands. While her book on *Hitasadhika* was intended towards character building among young children, she also contributed poems such as 'Prakritisobha' and 'Phularani' for publication in *Banhi*, a periodical edited by Lakhinath Bezbaroa. However, it was only in 1926 that the first Assamese novel, in the true sense of the term, *Bina*, was written by Snehalata Bhattacharya who was greatly influenced by her father, Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya, a renowned poet known as Agnikavi.

The protagonist of the novel was a widow named Bina, who is sent to the Balavikas School of Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta. There she meets her friend Amiya's brother, Prakash, who has returned from England after higher education there. As they fall in love, Bina undergoes a lot of emotional stress under the social constraints of widow remarriage. The author highlights issues on social awareness, women's education, health and bad influences as well as Gandhian movements of the time through the characters. Written in the early 1934s, her other works include *Amar Bihu* and *Santhar* which revealed the social changes that were taking place at that time, while *Bemejali* (Chaos) covered varied aspects related to theatre, festivals, superstition, vocational education, women's question on education, widow remarriage, misuse of power and colonial exploitation (Sarma: 2010).

In fact towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, many forces and factors contributed towards the stimulation of women writers. The *Jonaki* was launched in1889 at Kolkata and this in itself marked a new era in Assamese literature, which was to dominate the next four decades. While a few elite women had the opportunity of access to education in Assam, and began to write, there were also the Assamese youth educated in Kolkata and largely influenced by the ideology of the Brahmo Samaj, who began to protest against the inhumane atrocities, physical and emotional, against widows, through their writings. The atmosphere was also charged with the new political developments with Curzon's Partition of Bengal (1905) and the propagation of Gandhian ideology, particularly the concept of swadeshi. Women like Swarnalata Baruah, Yagyeswari Barkakati, Kunti Phukan and Bezbaruah's wife, Pragyasundari Devi, started regular contributions to *Jonaki*, *Banhi* and *Usha*, edited by Padmanath Gohain Baruah and also to *Alochani*, edited by Prassanna Kumar Baruah and Nilmoni Phukan (Sarma: 2010).

It is of interest to note that a tea planter, Mukhyada Prasad Baruva, initiated the first women's magazine, *Ghar Jeuti* (Light of the Home), as early as in the year 1923–24, in the form of a written manuscript. In this he was greatly inspired by his mother, Himala Baruva. He designed the cover with a bird perched on a tree, symbolizing women's emancipation and sunrise, a new dawn.[8] This was certainly the forerunner of the printed magazine by the same name, *Ghar Jeuti*, published by Kanaklata Chaliha (1903–35) and Kamalaya Kakati (1894–46), five years later in 1927–31. The articles in the various periodicals and magazines were not mere collection of poems or songs, but issues like women's education and self-reliance were also focused upon. Hence this was a time when not only were the women but even men like Gunabhiram Baruah and Hem Chandra Baruah were agents of change through their writings in the public mouthpieces and life examples, while

others like Mukhyada Prasad Baruva made subtle attempts towards social change by introducing the concept of a woman's magazine through which women may ventilate their views. Sudha Baruva, Mukhyada Prasad Baruva's sister, began her writing career through the handwritten magazine, *Ghar Jeuti*, to become the first woman short story writer. A collection of six short stories, *Jivanar Pratham Puvaha* (Life's First Morning),[9] was published only in 1984 (Sarma: 2010). Mahanta states that the publication of *Ghar Jeuti* is directly linked with the women's movement in Assam and with the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti at Dhubri in 1926. Though the magazine had an independent standing, it literally became the mouthpiece of the Assam Mahila Samiti and began publishing the proceedings of the different conferences. Kamalaya Kakati's personal life of struggle explains her dedication to the cause of women. She defied social norms and walked out of her husband's life with her child and lived with her parents as he married a second time. However, with the national struggle gaining momentum in 1930, the publication of the magazine ceased and women, such as Chandraprova Saikia, Dipanwita Chowdhury and others, continued to write revolutionary articles for another Assamese journal, *Awahan* (The Call), which started its publication in 1929 (Mahanta: 2008).

Wives of renowned Assamese writers like Nagendra Narayan Chaudhuri and Benudhar Rajkhowa, namely, Kiranbala Chaudhuri and Ratna Kumari Rajkhowa respectively, and other women writers like Kamala Devi, Bhubaneshwari Devi, Rajabala Das, Usha Bhattacharya, Swarnalata Saikia and Punyaprabha Das wrote on women's education and other issues related to social work and participation in the national movement, while the first literary article was written by Snehalata Bhattacharya, 'Sahitya Aru Asomiya' (Literature and Assamese). Often, it was found that women themselves would delineate their role and boundaries through such writings as Rajabala Das' 'Stri Siksanar Babe Kei Akharman' *(*A Few Lines on Women's Education), Hemaprapha Das' 'Adarsa Sowali' (Ideal Girl) Annada Barkakati's 'Narir Vartamana Kartavya' (Duties of a Woman), Basantalata Hazarika's 'Satir Atmanirbharta' (Sati's Independence), Ajalitora Neog's 'Nari Jagaran Aru Samajsanskar' (Woman's Awakening and Social Reform) (Sarma: 2010).

While most of these writings of upper-caste women focus on upper-class problems and issues, there were women writers who for the first time recorded the grievances of women belonging to the tribal communities or lower orders of the society. And unlike those women writers who had a familial background of education, writers like Jamuneswari Khataniar and Chandraprova Saikia were born into non-literary non-upper-caste families, and were school teachers. Jamuneswari Khataniar (1898–23) published her

first book of poems, *Arun*, in 1919, in her maiden name Jamunes.vari Saikia, on love and life, a deviation from other writers who focus on spirituality and the adversaries of life. Jamuneswari mentions in the preface to *Arun* that the book is intended to inspire women to write and not for money or fame (Mahanta: 2008). In 1923, she published her first short story related to the love affair of a couple of the Mising tribe, in *Chetana*. Chashme Nurjahan Begum, the first Assamese writer from the minority Muslim community, started a periodical called *Malaya* (Cool soft breeze), in which she wrote short stories like 'Bhagyar Paribartan' (Change of Fortune), 'Malina and Snehar Daan' (Love's Sacrifice) which reflect the lives of ordinary women who fall prey to the lust of the nouveau riche, government officers and upper-caste men. Gyanabala Baruah's 'Dudiniya Priti' (A Short-lived Affair) renders the miseries of a woman through the character Shalita, while Alaka Patangia, alias Chandrabala Baruah, wrote *Kamala* and *Bandir Jiyek* (Daughter of a Bonded Labour Woman). *Bandir Jiyek* is the story of a girl who helps with the chores in a family, as the system of *bandi-beti* prevailed, but is raped by the master who refuses to accept the responsibility of the child. The writer has successfully portrayed the atrocities and the agony of the girl. Again, in *Bhutar Upadrav* (Menace of Ghosts) she represents how the sorrow and misery of women go unnoticed in the society through the characters of Sonpani and Jetuki. Another prominent social critic is Suprabha Goswami, daughter of the famous writer Sarat Chandra Goswami, who deviated from the representation of traditional women and critiqued social norms in her short stories through such works as 'Luitor Moh' (The Greed of the Brahmaputra), Ejopa Kharuwa *Bengnena* (An Eggplant), *Dhanakuber*, A translation of The Midas Touch, *Tanuja. Lora Jetiya Dangor Hoi* (When the boy grows up) (Sarma: 2010). These short stories will be particularly helpful as sources for understanding the experiences of the marginalized women.

Yet the most remarkable example of women writers as agents of social change is Chandraprabha Saikia, who, like Gunabhiram Barua and Hem Chandra Baruah, broke all social norms to become the torchbearer of women's emancipation. Her lived experiences of sorrow, humiliation and betrayal found expression in her writings. Faced with the reality of deprivation and neglect in a large rural family in a remote village, Daisingari in Bajali of Kamrup, Chandraprava Das (her maiden name) witnessed the social ostracism her widowed sister faced on having married again especially since they belonged to a low caste in the social structure. She had been engaged to an older man as a child, as was the case in child marriages of this region, and when she came of age, she refused to marry him. This was the first defiance to social norms and many were yet to follow. In 1919, she joined

as the headmistress of a girls' school and it was then that she came into contact with the poet and writer Dandinath Kalita and fell in love. Kalita, a married man, refused to acknowledge her as his wife, nor did he let her use his surname as she was from a lower caste. Following the scandal, she had to leave her job and return to her village where a son was born in 1923. Since then she began using the name 'Chandraprava Saikiani' to tell the world of her 'married status'. In her short stories, *Devi*, published in *Bahni* (1918), and *Daibhagyar Duhita* (The Brahmin's Daughter), published in *Abahan* (1932), she condemns child marriages, social hypocrisy and boldly deals with issues of sexual exploitation of widows and prostitution. From 1925 onwards, however, she became engrossed with the activities of the Assam Mahila Samiti and Congress activities, devoting herself totally to the cause of the nation, and women's issues, in particular. Her novel *Pitribhitha* (The Paternal Homestead), published in 1937, depicts a strong woman character who tides through all adversities (Mahanta: 2008).

By the 1930s a whole new genre of literature appeared. Women playwrights emerged with the growth of the new literary outburst. Malabika Devi wrote *Adikavi* (Early Poet), *Champavati* (a name or a girl as graceful as the flower, Champa), *Sisu Gandhi* (The Young Gandhi) and *Ganboloi*. Nalinibala Devi wrote *Ses puja* (The Last Worship), *Parijator Abhishek* (Parijat's Coronation) and *Prahlad* and *Mirabai*. Chandraprava Saikia wrote *Sipahi Bidrohot* (Sepoy Mutiny), *Dillir Sinhasan* (The Throne of Delhi) and *Kavi Anav Ghosh*. Sachibrata Raichaudhuri wrote *Kon Bate* (Which Road?)(1948), *Pathar Sandhan* (In Search of a Road) and *Vipodor Sima* (Limits of Danger). Contribution to children's literature was made by Trailokeshwari Devi who wrote *Sandhiyar Sadhu* (A Story of an Evening) and *Sadhukatha* (Stories) in 1934. Ajalitara Neog translated children's stories from English to Assamese: 'Alibaba Aru Dukuri Dakait' (Alibaba and the Forty Thieves), 'Sinbador Satoti Jaljatra' (Hundred Voyages of Sinbad) and 'Alaudin Aru Eta Acharit Saki' (Alauddin and the Magic Lamp). Suprabha Goswami's book *Ramayan Mahabharator Katha* (Tales from Ramayana and Mahabharata) was published in 1939. She also translated stories of Anderson from English and published *Arihana* and *Kanika* in 1940. Eliza Whitney Brown also wrote for children. In 1926 Pratibha Devi (1911–32) wrote *Keko Dangoria*, a translation of the Spanish novel *Don Quixote*. Debabala Devi wrote *Volgar Bukut*, a translation of *On the Volga* in *Awahan* in 1940. Rajeswari Khatoniar translated and published Jawaharlal Nehru's letters to his daughter from Hindi, entitled *Sansar Pudhi*, while Hema Prabha Das translated Shakespeare's sto.ies and published two volumes, *Shakespeareor Galpa* (Sarma: 2010).

Thus besides plays, children's literature and translated works, biographies and autobiographies began to be written by women. Interestingly, almost all the biographies were on men. While Ratnavali Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's daughter, wrote on Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lakshmi Priya Das wrote on Swami Vivekanand in *Banhi*, Ajalitara Neog wrote on both Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Baruah and the latter had won her the Assam Sahitya Sabha Award. Nalinibala Devi wrote *Smriti Tirtha* (Pilgrimage of Reminiscence) (1948) a biography on her father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and on Sadar Vallabhai Patel as well. Kunjalata Devi was the only one who wrote a biography on a woman, *Rani Durgavati* (Sarma: 2010).

Post-1947 Period

Nalinibala Devi's autobiography, *Eri Aha Din Bor* (1976) (The Bygone Days), appears to be the only autobiography of the colonial period. Her writings as reflected in her autobiography enable one to contextualize women in colonial Assam within the social, economic and political milieu of the time. As such, women's autobiographies are a rich and important source for the reconstruction, retrieving and reinterpretation of women's history. Although such an endeavour would fail to include most women whose lived experiences are outside the spheres of social prestige and position, as women do not form a homogenous group that cuts across class, caste or ethnicity, Nalinibala Devi's work gives an insight into what affluent middle-class women thought about themselves and of other women, what men thought about women, and also the dynamics of social interaction in the 'private' sphere, between women and between men and women within the family and community, and their active participation in the 'public' sphere, against the backdrop of the slow and gradual transition taking place in the Assamese society and the growing Indian National Movement in Assam. The autobiography clearly marks the social, economic and political transition from the precolonial to colonial and postcolonial periods, in which the elite women emerge largely as the agents of social change. In many ways, her early life reflects the transition taking place in traditional Assamese society.

For an understanding of this process, a peek into Nalinibala Devi's background is absolutely necessary. Her life was underlined by strong influences of the Vaishnavite Movement of the 19th century, although she traces her origin to the Suryabipra Rudrakheori clan from Kanauj.[10] Her

great grandfather, Kalpanath Bordoloi, left Sibsagar, following Burmese atrocities, when he was only 12 years old, but fortunately, an Englishman took care of him, educated him in law and also gave him the job of Sadr Amin in the colonial government. He later married two sisters and settled in north Guwahati. His son Madhab Chandra Bordoloi was Nalinibala's grandfather. He obtained a law degree from Calcutta University, practised law and was later transferred to Barpeta, which was the seat of Vaishnavite religion and culture, as a deputy commissioner. Nalini's father was Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, who married Hemanta Kumari Devi, the daughter of a renowned person and a tea planter of Dibrugarh, Malbhog Barua.

Nalinibala was born in 1898 at Barpeta. Her grandfather was a man of resources. He built a big house, developed an orchard and had agricultural farms at Rangiya, Begena and Shila Sendurighopa. He supported almost a total of 80 families, with *bandi-beti* or servants in the big household, numbering about 15 or 16. Her grandfather supported them all along with their families. He received ₹800 per month as salary, which was the highest paid to any native official in those days. Of this pay he would give ₹2 to his daughters-in-law, ₹1 to his grandchildren,₹2 to the old lady servants or *beti* such as Gelibai and Makhibai, ₹5 for beggars and 50 paise to other helpers before he made many payments. Nalinibala would keep her pocket money under the safe custody of her grandmother as she did not have any means to spend it. On not knowing how to spend her pocket money, she writes that in those days there were no *chanachur* (roast grams) to buy, and no movies to go to. The absence of vendors selling roast grams point to the fact that there were no minor traders within the town, and the absence of movie halls mark the backwardness in technology in Assamese society. Her grandfather's gesture of giving pocket money to the women in a household of abundance reveals his concern and respect for them, not only of the immediate family members but also for the downtrodden and also explains to some extent why his illustrious son and Nalinibala Devi's father, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, took particular interest on issues related to women.

As she narrates her childhood, what is discernible is the severing of the interrelatedness and dependence of the woman with her natural environment, the gradual destruction of traditional knowledge systems, with the advent of colonialism and modernity. During winter, when they had chapped skin, their grandmother would mix grated orange peels with milk cream and apply it on their cheeks. As for hair wash, they were not allowed to use soap; instead, they used a home-made compound of *urad* dal (a kind of lentil), sesame, *aroi* rice (a kind of rice) and crushed seeds of *outenga* (dillenia indica). However, she mentions that when they would go out, her mother would apply 'Rosy Cream'

on her face and give the final touches with a powder puff. The role of her grandmother thus lies in the preservation of traditional knowledge, and that of her mother as related to child care. She also mentions how happy they were when her father would bring beautiful and colourful frocks from Calcutta. These may be taken as examples of how the advent of modernity began to slowly and steadily almost replace the traditional knowledge systems, and wherein women of the upper caste happen to be the agents of such change.

Another instance of traditional knowledge that she narrated was when she, an eight-year old, suffered from typhoid. Several people within their household died. The doctors treated her for a month and more, but in vain. Finally, Baikuntha Nath Chowdhury, a *kaviraj* (an ayurvedic practitioner), is said to have done a miracle by infusing cobra venom by pricking her skin with the bones of a fish called *kakila*. Such indigenous medicines and practices were slowly losing their importance to modern medicine in the colonial period itself. Yet on another occasion when she had jaundice and modern medicine failed, Durga Mohon Lahiri prescribed a dose of homeopathic medicine and she was cured. Her father then began to study homeopathy and provide medicines for the poor and needy from his *Wakil Khana*. She was given the charge of pasting the dosage on the medicine bottles and distributing them. She writes, 'My knowledge became richer by this experience of a compounder!' (Devi: 1994). Here one sees the father attempting to redefine boundaries and negotiate spaces for his daughter.

Her association with nature, strong spiritualism and patriotic leanings were reflected not merely in her autobiography, but in her other books such as *Shantipath*, a book on Upanishadic philosophy and the biographies of her father, *Smriti Tirtha* (1948), of Sadar Patel and *Vishwadeep* (A Collection of the Lives on some Famous Women). Such traces are also apparent in her poems such as 'Sandhiar Sur' (Evening Melody), published in 1928, 'Saponor Sur' (Melody of Dreams) (1943), 'Parasmani' (Touchstone) (1954), 'Yugadevta' (Hero of the Age), 'Jagriti' (Awakening), 'Janambhumi' (Motherland), 'Muktidoot' (Messenger of Freedom), 'Maha Manab' (The Great Man), in praise of Gandhi, and 'Antim Sur' (The Last Melody), 'Samoi Nai' (Time is Running Out) and 'Alakananda' (1967), written towards the later stages of her life.

Her association with her aunt, Mahindri Devi, who received the *Krishnamantra* and went into meditation for 12 years and returned to reside at their place, had a great impact on her and she writes that her presence had a sacred influence in the house. She also mentions about Swami Jogananda Paramhansa Deo, who lived six months below the ground with literally no food unless someone would keep some by the cave, and who told her that

if she needed his advice, she just had to think of him. She realized the truth of his words on many occasions. Their home was visited by many sages, one of whom even predicted the death of her two sons. She failed to understand why Swami Abhedananda, a disciple of Vivekananda, addressed her as 'Toposini Ma' in his letters to her from the United States. The association with the sages strengthened her intuitive and psychic powers, traits that are so closely associated with the woman's physiological power to create and rear new life. It has been clearly reflected in her writings. She was forewarned in her dream, which she describes as the '*bhabisat daibabani of bhawani*' (the forecast of goddess Bhawani) about her husband's death. She was ridiculed by her mother-in-law then, but within 24 hours, unexpectedly her husband died at the early age of 33, leaving her pregnant, besides having four children.

Remarkable social changes were apparent in her lifetime and as mentioned earlier, the upper-caste women themselves were the agents of change. She depicts a dreary picture of the purdah system, which was prevalent only among upper-caste women in Assam, for, as she states, the lower castes did not follow this practice and moved around freely. She recalls how women, both married or unmarried, had to always move under cover. The woman was not only veiled but when she would go out, she was covered on both sides by two big *japis* or huge bamboo hats, for women were even prohibited from being seen by the sun and moon! If she went on a horse-cart, the doors of the cart would be firmly locked. Even for social occasions like *panitola*, the ceremony of fetching river water to bathe the bride, the women had to be under purdah in a group for which a *saawdhuli* would be erected. A *saawdhuli* was a rectangular space created with a flowery cloth fixed with bamboos on four sides, without a roof. About 40 to 60 women would move together, singing *biya naam* (songs for marriage ceremonies) within that restricted space! She reflects thus:

> Those dreaded days seem like a bad dream. There is a heaven and earth difference between the women of those days and the present times. Who would care to keep an account of those women whose lives along with their talents have withered away?... However, I have no regrets now for one had to accept the system as a custom of the time, but as a child, I was very disturbed by this obstacle to women. [Translation mine]

The women had to celebrate Holi within the household only, while during Durga Puja celebrations, on the days of *saptami*, *asthtami* and *navami* (the seventh, eighth and ninth day of the Puja festival) when theatres were organized, a separate enclosure made out of bamboo sticks was made for the women. On Bijoya Doshami (10th day of the Puja), a tent which was

something like a mosquito net would be erected in the morning so that the women may see the immersion of goddess Durga on the river Brahmaputra. Once immersion was complete, they could go home on foot in moonlight across the open field. She recalls the pleasure and happiness they felt on being out in the open then. This narrative is indicative of women's groups existing in oppressive social structures. By 1921, she along with others discarded the purdah and crossed the boundaries of the 'private' sphere over to that of the 'public', thereby breaking into the male bastions as subordinates in the process of nation building.

Although her work depicts the picture of the elite class woman, it also gives an insight into her views on other women, such as those belonging to the lower castes. While she writes about the dreadful purdah system, a clear social distinction especially is discernible when she talks about the freedom enjoyed by the lower-caste women vis-à-vis the restrictions imposed on the upper-caste women. Again, the mention of the existence of *bandi-beti* as servants of the household primarily points to distinct class divisions in the society, and also to the existence of communities of servile women in a large household. *Bandi-beti* was a system that had features of slavery, as in the Western concept, in so far as they were bought, and it was a common practice since the days of Ahom rule. Yet they were not so for they could buy back their freedom, if they wanted to. They were more of a kind of bonded labour and who for generations together depend for their subsistence on the gentry in return for loyalty. She wrote, 'I sleep with my grandma. Being an old woman she gets up very early at 3am to pray. After her bath she takes betelnut and paan which Gellibai, one of the *bandis*, would pound for her.' So irrespective of the time of day or night, such women *bandis* had to be constantly at the service of their mistress. This provides a picture of the power relations within the 'private sphere' of women themselves.

Another community of women, as found in her writings, were the *kumaris* of Kamakhya temple. She described her visit to Kamakhya as a pilgrimage, a difficult and steep road with dense forests on either side. Pilgrims, including sickly old women come from far-off regions to visit the sacred place. The old women would ask for strength to proceed the upward climb thus, '*Ma, Ma Jagot jononi, shakti daini, shakti diya ma*' (Mother, Mother, the source of all knowledge and power, give me strength, mother). The *kumaris*, or the virgin girls who resided at the temple as part of the system of *kumari puja*, harassed the pilgrims a lot, not only asking for money but also pickpocketing them. The pilgrims had no other option but to give them money. She wrote that it was interesting to see some *kumaris* even abuse and curse the pilgrims if they were not given any money.

She also refers to yet another community of women, the prostitutes, whom she described as the ill-famed section of society. On her way to her friend's wedding in north Guwahati, she and her sister, Mrinalini, accompanied by 'Buribai', who also must have been a *bandi-beti*, had to go by boat which they would hail from the Steamer Ghat. As they went they had to cross a hill near 'Phatik Kutir', where the prostitutes resided. She wrote that they were prohibited to go that way by the elderly people as its inhabitants were sinners and, therefore, condemned by the society. However she saw women wearing beautiful saris and sitting outside while a man suddenly came and pulled a woman inside. This scene haunted her very much and to her it amounted to have committed a sin herself. She found no peace until she returned home, told her grandmother who advised her not to worry and pray to God to keep away from all vices (Devi: 1994). The middle-class morality shaped the fears of this elite woman to whom such a community of women are sinners, and even a look at them amounts to a sin. Such a mental block would not allow her, although being a woman herself, to even think or imagine what or why their lives have been so or to even put forth some questions as to whether society condemns prostitutes, or does it create them? Or are these women rebelling against the role of woman in society, or are they succumbing to it more fully? Michel Foucault stated that prostitution is potentially a rebellion against a woman's economic, social and sexual roles. He explains prostitution as a system run strictly by men, for men. Female prostitutes are subject to brutal male dominance at every turn (Fillingham: 2003) and this was evident to her even when she had only a brief glance. Nalinibala's attitude is not surprising as Gandhi's influence was very strong, and he himself did not include women who were 'not chaste in thought, word and deed' into his movement (Kumar: 1993).

Nalinibala reflected on the community of Muslim women at the national level. Begum Md. Ali visited Nalinibala's house, during Gandhi's first visit to Assam. She writes that the Begum wore a black burkha and had two attendants with her. When she spoke with the ladies she removed her burkha and Nalinibala describes her as a very beautiful woman. Nalinibala remarks that while in Assam, the practice of purdah was on the wane, at the national level, Muslim women were still under the conservative Mughal custom. Nalinibala, however, was greatly impressed by the community of Khasi women. Shortly after the Pandu Session of the Congress, Nalinibala and family moved to Shillong for good. It was only on arriving at Shillong that she realized the importance of women's own identity. She admired the sense of self-respect which Khasi women possessed. She appreciated a poor

Khasi woman who refused to accept old clothes offered by Nalinibala for her children (Devi: 1994).

The strong entrenchment of patriarchal ideology and practices in Assamese society is evident from several instances. Her grandfather was very fond of her and concerned about her education. He placed her study table in the corner of his office room and employed private tutors as there was no facility for the education of women in those days. He had once taken her to a wedding of the last of the scions of the Ahom kings, where the bride wore a heavy jewelled necklace that reached the lower abdomen; a *gojarmuktar satsori*, it was called. Her grandfather asked her if she would like to wear it and promised to buy it at a higher price than what the Marwaris would offer—who generally bought off all the jewellery of the Ahom kings—so that she may wear it as a bride. She wore that necklace for many marriage ceremonies, but when she got married, she was given only a small *passori mukta* necklace. On her grandfather's death, the valuable necklace was divided among his four sons along with the property division. She mentions that his death was the first grief of her life.

Very soon she fell victim to child marriage. At the age of 11, on 16 July 1909, she got married to Jibeswar Changkakoti. On her marriage, her teacher gifted a book on marriage customs, *Bibah Mangal*, a white silk handkerchief signifying purity and a sandalwood hand fan. He blessed her saying: '*Pitrikul sushobita Padmini, pati kular yasoishyawini hoa goi*' (become the epitome of goodness in your husband's family just as you had been at your father's), encouraging her to continue being a virtuous woman in her new home. She became a widow at the age of 21, and her father brought her to his house, when she decided to dedicate her life to meditation and books. As she stood before the family in white attire, her grandmother asked her to discard the white dress and wear silk *riha-mekhela*. On this her father questioned his mother thus, 'Why mother? Why must she not wear white? Since her childhood, I liked to see her wearing a variety of coloured silk dresses, and now my life as a father would be fulfilled if I were to see her dressed in white as *Sarbashukla Mahasweta* [goddess Saraswati]' (Devi: 1994). Her father's words were a *mahamantra* (powerful words) to her as if he had shown her the path that she was to lead then on, where no harm can come to her. He also gave her a *Madbhagwat Gita* and three volumes of Purnanda Giri's *Vedabani*. These books as well as Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* helped her through her struggles in her life with her five children. By comparing her to the goddess of learning, her father diplomatically prevented her from breaking social norms. It represents patriarchal domination through subtle ways.

Her life, however, turned into a new phase with her father's return from the United Kingdom in 1919, when their house became the political hub of Congress activities. She became involved in political discussion not only with her father but also with great leaders like Tilak and Bipin Pal. When the Non-cooperation Movement started in 1921, women, old and young joined the movement. She wrote that the women of the elite class removed their veils and joined the men. Her mother, Hemanta Kumari Devi, her father's sister Dharmada Devi, Tarun Ram Phukan's sister, Girija Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharyya, Ganeshwari Devi and others formed a volunteer force, Chetcha Sevak Bahini, started by Debeswar Sharma and organized by Muhimuddin Ahmed, and went on to spread the message of non-cooperation, swadeshi, boycott of foreign goods and abstinence from opium in the villages. Hundreds of volunteers, including women, joined the Chetcha Sevak Bahini, leaving behind their families and the comfort of their homes. In this movement, she wrote, women had to face objectionable behaviour from the village people. In Guwahati, Nalinibala and other women started a school for spinning yarn. She mentioned that British spies were always around and would even follow the women organized for spinning yarn, and so Ganaswari Das jokingly called these British men as '*dhitik tik*', meaning 'detective'. As the movement gained momentum, the police began searching all houses. Nalinibala was entrusted by her father with the duty of hiding all important papers which she carried out well, along with similar such responsibilities which were acclaimed by her father.

Again, on Gandhi's first visit to Assam, as her father selected 500 volunteers and made them vow to sacrifice their lives for the independence of the country, she and her sister, Mrinalini, undertook the task of making 500 Gandhi caps for the volunteers for which they had to work day and night. Gandhi addressed both men and women at Natya Mandir. Ghanakanti Phukon presented him a fine woven shawl, *seleng kapur*, on behalf of the Assam Mahila Samiti. He was very impressed and addressed the Assamese women particularly, which was translated into Assamese by TR Phukan. In the evening he visited their house and along with him came Maulana Md. Ali, Begum Md. Ali, Jamunalal Bajaj, Azad Shobhani and Krishna Das. Nalinibala served them fruits along with her mother. Later, Begum Md. Ali addressed the women.

Other national leaders like Rajendra Prasad, Madan Mohan Malaviya and Subash Chandra Bose visited their house. Her mother gave Bose a *muga* cloth so that he may make a kurta for himself. 'We spoke in Bengali with him', she said. Following the spread of swadeshi/*khaddar*, Bordoloi and Phukan carried loads of cloth, most of which are generally spun by the women on

their backs and sold them at Fancy Bazar. They were arrested and put in jail (1922), where Bordoloi learnt to spin thread and weave cloth too. She mentions that her daughter who got married at the age of 12 was deprived of wearing the traditional white silk with gold thread work dress for her wedding and had to be content with coloured *khaddar* from Wardha.

That year, while her father was in Sylhet Jail, she lost her five-year-old son Putoli. He died a martyr for she writes that not only would he sing in a sweet voice that women would most generously contribute towards the Swaraj Fund, but also that he died in a fire accident, while burning his clothes secretly. At about this time her sister Mrinalini too died, leaving three children under her mother's care. This points to the exceptional qualities women have in shouldering responsibility at a time of crises. Moreover, the household was in a debt from Bordoloi's personal loans for the Congress activities, as was the case with the household of TR Phukan too. After his return from Shimla in 1935, when Bordoloi had gone to fight against Jinnah's idea of inclusion of Assam in Purba Banga Islam Pradesh (East Bengal Islam Pradesh), he was suffering from ailments and was very tired, but he would not rest till his death. He warned his wife about the serious financial consequences she would face upon his death, yet she gave him full support till the end, asking him not to worry at all. He died on 16 February 1936.

Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 was for the Swaraj Fund, towards which the women worked very hard. At a public meeting held at Judges' Field, Amalprova Saikia and Nalinibala spread their *aanchal*, the free end of their dress, to collect money. With the presence of Gandhi, the Assamese women were so filled with patriotic fervour that the women leaders began to collect donation by spreading their *aanchals*, the loose end of the traditional apparel, before the women participants. The *aanchals*, it is said, very soon became heavy with gold and silver jewellery. The first donation came from a college student, Nirmala Das, who generously gave away her gold chain weighing seven to eight *tolas*. Gandhi picked up the chain and showed it to all, indirectly appealing to all to make such sacrifices. Another major contribution of the women to the national movement was the production of *khaddar* cloth woven by the Assamese female weavers, *sipini*, for the Pandu Congress Session in 1926. The pandal was huge enough to accommodate about 10,000 people along with four *baat ghar* (rest houses) which were also done up with white *khaddar*. TR Phukan displayed to Gandhi the beautiful cloth woven by Assamese women at Sonitpur, Ganeshghat. Gandhi is said to have said, 'Assamese women translate their dreams into weaving'.

In Guwahati there were no proper schools and Nalinibala's effort at establishing one did not succeed. In 1931, the Kamrup Mahila Samiti was formed with Nalinibala as the first president. At this juncture the Sharda Bill which was passed in 1930 against child marriage led to a big controversy. Nalinibala strongly supported the Bill and stated that these child marriages amounted to *Kanyamedh Yajna* or child sacrifice. Her support was due to the fact that not only had she suffered on that account, but she had seen the miseries her aunt Dharmada Devi and niece Annada had to undergo because of child marriage. She supported the Bill publicly but in this she did not get the full support of other women. A controversy was raised when Nalinibala asked a renowned citizen of Guwahati not to marry off their minor daughter. However, at a public meeting votes were cast and the majority supported the Bill. Nalinibala and Kamala Devi Goswami married off their daughter and niece respectively, only at the age of 16 (Barua: 2000).

As regards the 1942 movement, she described the insecurity of the women when the British army literally took over the whole town and the schools and colleges became 'army forts'. The insecurity arose due to the British soldiers being on the lookout for girls at night. She states, however, that the Indian soldiers were very helpful. She narrates the *lathi* charge (charge with the baton by police) on students, both boys and girls, who had gone to oppose the holding of a pro-British exhibition. She states that the boys tried to protect the girls during the *lathi* charge. She, as president of the Assam Mahila Samiti organized a protest meeting at the Natya Mandir, where a resolution was passed against government repression. She described this as the beginning of the 1942 movement. She also mentions the formation of the Deka Gabharu Dol (Young Women's Group) and how Kanaklata and Ai Bhogeswari became martyrs.

Nalinibala, as with other Assamese women, regarded Gandhi in very high esteem. She stated that his words were like *vedic shloka*s (verses from the Vedas). However, Gandhi's silence on the issue of the Purba Banga Islam Pradesh led Nalinibala to send a very emotional poem to the leader, which was translated into English by Hem Barua. The poem reflected her strong patriotic feelings for her motherland. Towards the later part of her autobiography she reflects on Gandhi's belief in feminine power. She wrote that Gandhi always moved with three beautiful unmarried women, Mani Ben Patel, Manu Gandhi and Sushila Nayyar; the latter was a doctor. He would send such women to riot-torn areas to suppress violence and the strategy worked miracles. She mentioned that it was an example to the world at large, an example of the display of the victory of *ahimsa* (non-violence),

as represented by feminine power, over *himsa*, or violence. It is true that Gandhi associated feminine power with spiritual and moral courage, but Nalinibala Devi failed to realize the limitations of Gandhi's strategy of mobilizing women.

Nalinibala Devi as a woman writer of colonial Assam gave an interesting insight into many aspects, not only of the woman of the upper class and her relations with other women and men within the private sphere, but also a glimpse into the existence of other communities of women, outside it, the interrelation between women and their environment, and much else. Her autobiography reveals many aspects wherein the woman herself can be seen as the agent of the slow and gradual social changes taking place at that time and crossing the boundaries to participate in the process of nation-building, and not a passive recipient of the processes of modernization. However, this was true only of the upper-caste woman. The majority of the total female population was involved in agrarian and trading activities and, belonged to the lower castes and so the issues of purdah, education and others did not concern them. In fact, they enjoyed greater social freedom than the upper-caste women. Thus, Nalinibala's contribution is only towards a partial women's history with two major limitations; it focused only on a specific geographical area, namely Guwahati, and was written from the standpoint of the upper-caste Hindu woman. Nowhere in her autobiography did she attempt to reflect on the lives of Gelibai, Makhibai or Buribai. Nevertheless, the importance of her work lies in the fact that it raises many questions which would help in establishing a coherent analysis of the interlinkages between the emerging social forces within a changing patriarchy, the modes of production, reproduction, the changes in gender relations effected through changes in the economy as well as their active political participation in the national struggle for independence and regional mass movements, so necessary in an attempt at writing the woman into history.

In the post-Independence period, the literary zeal of women writers became more prominent and, evidently, with the spread of education it was not largely restricted to the upper class. The new class of literature that emerged was greatly influenced by bold and revolutionary writers such as Chandraprava Saikia of the colonial period. Although the note of patriotism continued to be reflected in the poems, modern women writers began to record the lived experiences of the subjugated and oppressed class as well. Examples of such writings can be seen in the poetry of Divyaprabha Bharali's 'Aparna' (1947), 'Malancha' (A Bouquet of Flowers) (1954) and 'Bharat Tirtha' (Indian Pilgrimage) (1978); Sharadabala Das' 'Kabitar Har' (Garland of Poems) (1969), 'Kakoli' (Bird's Song) (1978) and 'Kalijar Sur'

(Music of the Soul) (1981). Other poems by women are Lakhyahira Das' 'Prathama'(The First One) (1952), 'Sur Setu' (Bridge of Melody) (1956), 'Geetarghya' (Gift of Songs) (1956), 'Mayurapankhi' (Feathers of the Peacock) (1968), 'Antargat Nadi' (The River Within) (1979), 'O Mor Cinaki Des' (O My Own Country) (1982) and 'Lakhahirar Git' (Lakhyahira's Song) (1988). Nirmalprabha Bordoloi's 'Sudirgha Din aru Rtu' (Longest Day and Season), published in 1982, won her the Sahitya Akademi Award. 'Dinar Pisat Din' (Day after Day) (1977), 'Antaranga' (Intimate) (1978), 'Samipesu' (Yours Sincerely) (1977), 'Sonabarani Ai' (Golden Mother) (1980), 'Suriya Mat' (Melodious Voice) (1992) and 'Surujmukhi' (One Who Faces the Sun) (1985) are other contributions of Bordoloi (Sarma: 2010).

For about three decades from the 1940s short stories by women writers were published in the periodical 'Ramdhenu'. Nirupama Bargohain wrote under the pseudonym Neelima Devi in 'Ramdhenu'. Her short stories included 'Anek Akas'(Many Skies) (1961), 'Jalachabi' (Movie) (1966), 'Sunyatar Kavya' (Poems of Emptiness) (1969) 'Khiriki Kakhar Gas' (Tree by the Window) (1986), 'Jananir Sandhanat Ejan Deka Manuh' (Young Man in Search of Mother), 'Ipar Sipar' (This Side, That Side) and 'Rehai Mulya' (Discount Price). Bargohain dealt with several issues related to women and gender relations vis-à-vis the process of modernization. Neelima Sarma's 'Anyasuti' (Another Stream) (1967), 'Pran Aru Prachurya' (Life and Wealth) (1985), 'Santhar', 'Setubandhan' (The Bridge), 'Trisha' (Thirst) and 'Avaran' (Veil) provide the backdrop of the Assam movement against the issue of immigrants to the state of Assam. In 1990, Sneha Devi (1916–90) won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her *Snehdevir Ekuri Galpa* (Snehdevi's 20 Stories); other contributions included *Krishna Dwitiyar Jonak* (Second Day after Full Moon) (1957), *Snehdevir Galpa* (Snehdevi's Story) (1968), and *Snehdevir Srestha Galpa* (Snehdevi's Best Stories) (1981); these mostly depicted the complexity of the human mind (Sarma: 2010).

Another remarkable writer is Mamoni Raisom (Indira) Goswami, who contributed to short stories through her works such as 'Hridaya Ek Nadi Naam' (A Heart Is a Synonym for River) (1990), Ishwar, 'Jakhmi Yatri' (Wounded Traveller), 'Anyana' (The Unique One) (1991) and 'Mamoni Raisom Goswamir Priya Galpa' (Mamoni Raisom Goswami's Favourite Stories) (1998). Man's lust is shown through the character of an old man, Pitambar Mahajan, in *Sanskar* (Family Life), while she deals with the feelings and emotions of a prostitute in *Abha Gardenar Sokupani* (Tears of Ava Gardener), and that of a young widow who was moved to Vrindavan in *Bairagi Bhomora* (The Carefree Bumble Bee) (Sarma: 2010). In one of her novels, *Chenabar Sont* (Waves of Chenab), she depicted the lives, beliefs

and practices of the exploited labourers working on the bridge over River Chenab. In 1973, *Neelkanthi Vraj* (Tolerance of Atrocities by Widows at Vrajadham) written against the backdrop of life of widows at Vrajadham in Vrindavan was published. The story centres around three young women. Saudamini, a young widow from an orthodox family falls in love with a Christian man. Her father, a doctor by profession, decides to move to Vrajadham and expects his daughter to get involved in his profession. As a woman, her mother well understood the agony of her child. Finally the father asks the young man to come to Vrajadham, but Saudamini refuses to marry him. The second character is that of Mrinalini whose father was lecherous and mother was mentally ill. Goswami details all her miseries which ultimately made Mrinalini mentally ill as well. Shashi was the third character who was an orphan and supported by the priest of a temple. After the death of the priest, Shashi becomes an orphan for the second time and faces a whole lot of problems. The writer has depicted the feelings, emotions and issues of women at Vrindavan very successfully (Goswami: 2007).

Another book dealing with the exploitation of labourers is *Mamare Dhara Tarowal* (The Rusted Sword), published in 1981, which received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982. The novel is set in Rae Barelli, Uttar Pradesh, where in 1969 an aquaduct bridge was being built over the river Sai. She depicts their struggle in life as well as the ongoing labour strike and its impact on them. She highlights Narayani as the female protagonist who not only suffers from poverty but also has to bear the lust of people from the upper classes. She marries Shibu Dhasala, an alcoholic and, hence, the responsibility of the family fell on her and ultimately she becomes rebellious and gives herself up to prostitution (Goswami: 2007). In 1981, she wrote *Dantal Hateer Uiyen Khowa Hauda* (Termite-infected Howdah of the Mighty Tusker), set in the traditional milieu of Amaranga in south Kamrup in Assam. Goswami shows the conflict between tradition and modernity. 'Dantal Hatee' in the title probably signifies the power of tradition vis-à-vis a decadent society, symbolized as 'Uiyen Khowa Hauda', a termite-infected howdah. The setting is in the Damodariya Satra, to which she belongs and she critiques the inhumane behaviour and restrictions imposed upon widows. The protagonist of the novel is a child widow, named Giribala, who faces violence, lust, hatred as well as love. Her educated brother, Indranath, allows her to help Mark, a research scholar who had come to the Satra to study the ancient manuscripts. Defiance against social injustice is depicted in the form of Giribala moving around with Mark, her refusal to worship her husband's wooden sandals, her refusal to return to her husband's house and disinterest in immersing her lecherous husband's bone-ashes (*asthi*) and consumption

of meat in spite of strong opposition. Both Giribala and Indranath meet a tragic end (Goswami: 2007). Her autobiography *Adha Lekha Dastvej* (The Unfinished Autobiography) was translated into English with an introduction by Amrita Pritam entitled *An Unfinished Autobiography*, in 1999, which won her the Gyanpith Award in 2000. Other novels included *Bashiruddinor Chaku* (Bashiruddin's Eyes) (1970), *Ahiran* (1975), *Udayabhanur Charitra* (Uday Bhanu's Character), *Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusrit Prishtha* (A Page Stained by Blood and Dust) (1994), *Dasharathir Khoj* (Dasarathi's Footsteps) (1998) and *Chinnarmastor Mano Hato* (The Chinese Teacher Mano Hato)(2001).

In her novel, *Jeevansangram* (Struggle of Life), Hiranmayi Devi situates the women characters in a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms and values. She focuses on the atrocities on women at different levels and projects defiance through the character of the widow Lakshmipriya's daughter, Beli. In the same novel she uses the character of Urmila to express the hypocrisy in men. She continues the tone of revolt against social injustice in *Emuthi Aabir Rang* (A Handful of Colourful Holi). Praneeta Devi wrote *Dhansirir Usuponi* (The Weeping of River Dhansiri) in 1961, based on the question of widow remarriage (Sarma: 2010). Neelima Datta's autobiography *Luitar Paani Jaabi O Boi* (Let the Waters of the Luit Flow) speculated on women's life. *Akasbanti* (Lamp of the Sky), *Shialshikar* (Fox Hunt), *Pranasikha* (Flame of Life), *Dhumuhar Pisat* (After the Tempest) and *Aparajita* (The Undefeated) were other novels (Sarma: 2010).

Nirupama Borgohain is another remarkable woman writer. She wrote an autobiography, *Vishwas Aru Sanshayar Majedi* (Through Faith and Uncertainty), and published more than 33 novels. *Sei Nadi Nirvadhi* (The River Keeps Flowing) was published as early as 1953 and *Ejan Budha Manuh* (An Old Man) in 1966. The latter novel is centred round a father–son relationship but progressive ideas of inter-caste marriage are expressed in the story as well. *Anya Jeevan* (Another Life) represents feminist thought through the character of Putali. Borgohain is renowned for her biographical novel, *Abhiyatri* (The Traveller), which won her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993. The significance of this contribution is that Borgohain has highlighted social injustice on the one hand, and how women themselves can play a proactive role in social transformation, on the other, by citing a real life example of Chandraprava Saikia as a feminist writer, social activist and freedom fighter. The novel is based on the writings of Pushpalata Das in *Lokayat* (People's Verdict) and private letters of Saikia and the father of her son, Dandinath Kalita. She depicted Saikia's life story as a revolt against social norms by marrying Kalita, a married man and then by going to her

paternal home to give birth to her son and raising him up on her own, as Kalita refused to marry her. What is even more surprising is that she kept in touch with Kalita through correspondence. This unconventional story was very well depicted by Borgohain. The female character Kamala, the wife of Kalita, was shown as a very compassionate woman. Besides, the author traced the struggle of Saikia in pursuing her studies, her life as a teacher, and social activist participating in students' and agrarian unrest, and women's struggle. Her most important contribution was the establishment of the Asom Mahila Samiti (Women's Organization of Assam), spreading awareness against social or gender injustice. Family and social life are depicted in her novels such as *Chhaya Aru Chhabi* (Shadow and Picture) (1970), *Antahsrot* (Internal Current of Waves) (1968), *Dinar Pisat Din* (Day after Day) and *Cactusor Phul* (Flower of the Cactus); *Eke Jon Eke Beli* (The Same Sun and Moon) is written from a feminist perspective and emphasizes gender equality as the only means of change (Sarma: 2010).

Thus women writers of Assam have played a significant role through their ideas in novels, short stories and poems in bringing about change in society. The autobiographies and biographies will be particularly helpful in writing the woman back into history. In the process they added a new genre to Assamese literature. This fresh spurt of Assamese literature by women writers became evident following several socio-economic changes, the spread of women's education, in particular. In the pre- and early colonial period the issues that were taken up by women were mainly on morality and ideals of womanhood as envisaged by the patriarchal society. Women literature of the colonial period became bolder and handled issues like child marriage, widow remarriage, social ostracism, prostitution and other issues related to women. Moreover, it is not merely the writings of the women that brought about social change, but the women themselves played a proactive role as the agents of change. Chandraprava Saikia did not relent to the hypocrisy of society; Mamoni Raisom Goswami defied social norms, not merely by wearing a big red bindi and red clothes, when widows were to wear white clothes only, but by making her life an open book through her autobiography.

A Gender Perspective of the Text on the Skin in Northeast India

Traditional tattoos formed an integral part of most tribal cultures in the past; however, it is gradually becoming a dying art and almost obsolete among the

young generation with the onslaught of rapid modernization. Traditional tattoos constitute an important category of tribal art, as also a 'text' on the skin! The powerful symbolism of tattoos conjures different images and meanings depending on the social context and cultural perspective. For the Western mind, a tattoo would indicate slavery with a negative connotation, or a group identity, while for non-Western cultures, particularly in Northeast India, it would be indicative of gender discrimination, social status or privilege, with a note of pride, a sanctioned cultural practice. Though a dying tradition, it is important in terms of identity, ritual, adornment, therapy and an unconventional source for writing history of these marginalized people, including women. The young generation is more acquainted with tattoos in line with Western rock or film stars, in the form of the Cross of Jesus, dragon, eagle, vulture, but even these positive symbols are now giving way to the skull, devil and Satan. What today is a personal or fashion statement, or a group identity, tattoos formed an integral socio-religious practice in the past. Hence a distinction need be drawn between 'traditional' as opposed to 'modern' tattoos. In most traditional societies, different or similar tattoos are found in both men and women; hence some tattoos are gender neutral, others discriminatory. The Northeast is inhabited by over 200 of the 635 tribal groups in the country, for whom tattoos are not merely ornamental but also form a 'text' on the skin. Traditional tattoos need to be understood as ideas of the past—the collective mentalities of past generations, as propounded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, with their emphasis on '*l'histoire des mentalités*' or the history of mentalities.

The usage and importance of social practices such as traditional tattoos as a non-conventional source to understand gender differentiation in tribal societies needs to be enhanced or encouraged to reconstruct ethnohistory in Northeast India. Traditional tattoos were very popular among the tribes of the Northeast, particularly among the hill tribes, for example, Abors, Apatanis, Nagas and Singphos and the plains' tribes like the Bodos and Kacharis. In fact, there is urgency in undertaking research on the significance of traditional tattoos, in general, in the region. Attention needs to be drawn to the distortion of ethnohistory drawn from tattoos in colonial historiography, such as ethnologies, monographs, accounts and memoirs written by British administrators, missionaries and doctors. Tattoos are powerful symbols to portray the social status of both men and women, gender differentiation, religion, aesthetic sense as well as a therapy of the ethnic cultures of the region.

The word 'tattoo' is derived from the Polynesian word 'ta' which means 'to strike' and the Tahitian word 'tatau' which implies 'to mark something'.

Tattoo is a design marked on the skin through the insertion of colour, ink or some other pigment in the outer layers of the skin, the epidermis, into the dermis, the second layer of the skin, with a sharp implement. Although the procedure is painful and risky in terms of the possibility of contracting an infection, yet tattoos form such an integral part of the lives of certain communities that not to undergo the procedure would mean a defiance of societal norms. The resulting patterns and figures vary according to the purpose of the tattoo. Different cultures use different techniques. Some of the most commonly used tools are bird's claws, beaks, fish and animal bones and slits of bamboo. The tool of choice is generally slit into two to three sections and then fixed upon a stick. This was then dipped into the dye and the apparatus is worked into the skin in whichever part of the body the tattoo is intended, by gently hitting the same with a two feet long stick. The dye used for traditional tattoos were extracts of nuts, roots, leaves, animal parts, sugarcane juice and flowers as well.[11] The Noctes of Sadiya and Balipara were mentioned in the *Gazetteer* as 'Eastern Nagas' or 'Nagas of the Sadiya Frontier Tract', by British officials. The art of tattooing is known as *bifa* at Laju village and *khuta* in other areas. Tattooing of women is a social custom while with men it is generally associated with headhunting. The Noctes engage in a very painful operation of tattooing. After the designs are sketched on the skin they are pricked by thorns of cane and as blood oozes out, ash of straw is smeared over the pricked areas. This causes the body to swell with severe pain. Hot fermentation is given for a few days as a substitute for medicine. It takes about a week or two for the wound to be healed. In another method, the person is intoxicated prior to the process and after the operation, is left in dirt and blood for three days in an unconscious state. Later the tender sprouts of a particular medicinal plant called a *bhat-teeta* tree is pounded and smeared over the wounds and it takes about 25 days for the wound to be healed (Dutta: 1978). The tribes of the Northeast have indigenous ways, techniques and tools of tattooing, peculiar to each tribe. This in itself becomes an interesting area of study.

Colonial historiography in the form of memoirs, diaries, letters, reports or descriptive accounts is laudable in so far as Westerners place their experiences on record, which prove important when there is a dearth of data to write history of marginalized people and their culture. It was particularly useful in writing this section. However, colonial historiography carries with it a load of misinterpretation, stemming from a lack of understanding of tribal culture, lack of not knowing the local dialect and the tendency of the administrators, doctors and lawyers to interpret things from the colonial point of view.

In his account of the Abors, near Sadiya, in 1853, Father Krick, a missionary, wrote: 'The males are tattooed at the age of 18; the pattern is, in my opinion, of evidently Christian origin' (Krick: 1953). This statement reveals that *one*, tattooing is a social practice or an initiation ritual, conducted at a particular matured age of the individual, and *second*, that the practice of being confined to the male member of the society, entails gender-discrimination. These give us a fair idea of some of the social practices. The statement also reveals that Krick categorically believed in the strong influence of Christianity on the so-called Abor tribe. This assertion appears to be far-fetched and largely influenced by his proselytizing mission, although he gives an explanation at length in support of his viewpoint. In fact Coggin Brown and Kemp remarked that in this explanation of Abor tattoo marks, Father Krick was unduly influenced by his zeal as a missionary. There is no reason to attempt the derivation of such symbols from Christian sources, as the cross is one of the most simplest designs that one can imagine or 'is found in some form or another in all *savage* [emphasis mine] ornamentation. The designs found nowadays tattooed on Abor men and women are far more varied in form and character than Father Krick's observation would lead one to suppose' (Brown and Kemp: 1913).

Krick's description of the tattoos gives an interesting idea about their placement, size, colour as well as a marker of gender differentiation and other implications. He mentions that a majority of the Abors wear a perfectly shaped Maltese cross of bluish colour either on the forehead or calves, while others wear the regular Jesus Cross with the vertical beam running along the nose and the cross-bar above the eyes, or the Lorraine cross with the upper cross-beam on the forehead and the lower across the bridge of the nose. That tattoos indicate gender differentiation is evident when Krick states that the women have the Maltese cross tattooed on the upper lip and the Lorraine cross on their legs with two St. Andrew's crosses drawn on either side. Generally men wear three vertical and parallel lines on their chin, and women have five or seven on the chin and four on the upper lip, two on either side of the cross, and the whole design is bracketed. Needham mentions that the women were tattooed with perpendicular lines not only over the lips and corners of their mouths, which does not improve their looks, but also on the back of the legs, right under the bend of their knee, above the calf (Needham: 1884).

Krick questioned the origin and meaning of these signs. First, he believed that they were a distinctive mark given by God, and the one who wears it is protected and accepted by God after death or otherwise God will disown him. Second, as regards its origin, Krick believed that the signs passed on

through a northern tribe and others were ignorant about it (Krick: 1959). Krick's interpretation was totally based on his own religious ideas. He strongly asserted that it was the Christian cross and enumerated the following reasons.

> [First], No other marks are tattooed on their bodies. [Second], Their crosses are altogether similar in shape to our four crosses: the ordinary cross, the Maltese, the St. Andrew's and the Lorraine cross. [Lastly] The spiritual meaning attached to them by the natives strongly confirms my conjecture. (Krick: 1959)

Besides, he also interpreted the three, five and seven vertical lines as

> number 3 ... a reminiscence of the Blessed Trinity, the number 5 a reminder of the five wounds of Our Lord, and the number 7 a figure of the seven sacraments.... Whereas the four lines on the upper lip might with some plausibility represent some virtues or mysteries. (Krick: 1959)

Krick tried to justify his statement by trying to establish the time about when the Abors came into contact with Christianity. He mentions a book entitled *La Chine Illustrée*, printed in Amsterdam in 1665, authored by Father Athanasius Kircher. Kircher mentions several missions established in Tibet, China and Tartary from the time of the Apostle St. Thomas. He published a sketched map with the chief towns and districts and on it he traced the route followed by Fathers Francis Dorville and John Grabere from Peking to Goa, through China, Tartary, Tibet and Bengal. These fathers travelled from Lhasa to the north of the Abor country. In this country they discovered evident traces of the Christian religion with three men by the names of Dominic, Francis and Anthony dwelling there.

In 1826, Colonel R Wilcox traced the adoption of the Cross by the Abors to the 12th century when a mission was established to the south of Tibet among a tribe called Shokhaptra. Krick believed that it is the Shokhaptras, being their immediate neighbours, who influenced the usage of the cross by the Abors. 'Or may be that the missionary, in order to bring home to those *uncultured minds and hearts* [emphasis mine] the truths of our faith, advised his catechumens to tattoo themselves with the cross', Krick argued, or perhaps that the missionary was afraid that after his death there would be no pastor to perform his last rites, or the natives wished to preserve the new faith (Krick: 1959). Such explanations seem too farfetched and besides, Krick's comment on 'uncultured minds and hearts' of the Abors reveal the colonial mentality of superiority of the white race. This is again reflected in

his statement on tattoos: 'I once met a Thibetan [*sic*] who was marked with the same sign; on my asking where he had learned to wear it, he pointed towards the Padam country, adding that he had received it from the *savage mountaineers* [emphasis mine]' (Krick: 1959).

Elsewhere Krick remarked:

> [T]he *savages* [emphasis mine] were unable to explain the origin of this symbol; but they believe that any man who is marked with this sign, is protected in this life, and taken straight to heaven in the next, and that none but these are called to share God's felicity.... I made them understand I was a priest, a teacher of prayer, and that I had come to explain to them the mysterious power of the cross. I then took my crucifix, kissed it, and let them kiss it each in turn. (Krick: 1959)

Major H Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam remarked:

> Many of them have the mark of the cross tattooed on their forehead, but I could get no satisfactory account of the origin of affixing this emblem. They said it was intended to stand in the place of the brass utensils and other articles buried with them at their funerals, in case they should die poor, and not be able to afford them. (Vetch: 1848)

In both Krick's and Vetch's observation, it is clearly evident that they have not been able to construe the inner meanings of the tribal belief underlining the traditional tattoos and Krick has in fact distorted their significance totally. The concept of 'God' and 'heaven' may have been alien to them and perhaps Vetch's statement may be more suggestive of tribal beliefs than Krick's.

Tattooing of faces is a common characteristic of older Apatani men and women. RB McCabe states that the Apatanis of Lower Subansiri District tattoo their faces distinctly. The marks of distinction about the appearance of the Apatanis are the tattoos on the face of both males and females. Gender differentiation is apparent also in the tattoos of the Apatanis. The male tattoos below the mouth with a horizontal line drawn across the under lip and straight lines are drawn downwards from it to the point of the chin. The women are tattooed with broad blue lines from the top of the forehead to the tip of the nose, and from the lower lip to the base of the chin (McCabe: 1897). It is of interest to note that tattoos among the Singphos are markers of social distinction. Tattooing of women appears to be prevalent only among the privileged ones of the society. For example, Ningro Samon, the Singpho chief of Mung Lung, popularly known as Sam Nong, boasted that it cost him ₹60 to have his last new wife tattooed. Macgregor stated that Singpho women

are generally tattooed on the calf of the leg, eight bars alternately black and white. As a rule unmarried girls were not tattooed (Macgregor: 1887). This again reveals that tattoos indicate social status, married or unmarried. That tattoos among the Singphos marked social distinction or status is apparent from Gray's remark,

> Singpho women have their legs from the knee downwards tattooed in parallel bars; others again are without mark of any kind. On inquiry I find that only women of the better classes are permitted to tattoo; men do not tattoo except very slightly and then only on the arm or shoulder. (Gray: 1892)

Certain social practices relating to tattoos among the Nagas are discernible in John Owen's remark: 'On the young men attaining the age of manhood, or when about 20 years of age, they are tattooed, declared servants of the Chief, also eligible for marriage, and are compelled to wrestle with, and often to fight with weapons, a corresponding sized villager' (Owen: 1844). Thus tattooing as a social practice indicates several things, such as attainment of maturity, eligibility for marriage, to be a warrior and a wrestler and also acquiring status in the polity as 'servants of the Chief'. This is inferred only from Owen's observation; it requires a local researcher to verify the truth of the statement. Moreover, Owen does not specify as to which Naga tribe he is writing about. The same holds for topographer Woodthorpe's description.

RG Woodthorpe describes the Nagas of Mutan, Bor-Bansang, Senua, Ninu and Nisa villages. As regards tattoos, he states that the men of the region are generally good looking but the tattooing on their faces is so heavily done that they appear perfectly black. In others the tattooing is blue, and it makes the bare portion of the fair-complexioned face, appear pink by contrast. The tattoo on the face is called *ak* in Naga language. It consists of four continuous lines across the forehead, round and underneath the eyes up to the nose, back over the cheeks and round the corners of the mouth to the chin. Rows of spots follow the outside lines and two fine lines mark outside the nose in a large diamond space. The Mutan and Senua men do not tattoo the body. They tattoo their thighs instead with lines and spots, diamond or egg-shaped patterns. The upper portion of the tattoo would be continued round to the back. The Namsangias and Borduarias do not tattoo their face at all, but tattoo their shoulders, wrists, bodies and thighs. The men of Voka and Khanu cover their chest with fine lines, either horizontal or zigzagged (Woodthorpe: 1876).

In this description, it is found that the colours used are black and blue, and horizontal lines appear, in contrast to the vertical lines among the

Abors and Singphos mentioned earlier. Gender differentiation identified through tattoos are obvious from the following description by Woodthorpe, although the horizontal lines and the diamond pattern appears to be gender-neutral; the women tattoo a good deal on the shoulders, body and legs, but not on the face. The shoulders are tattooed with diamond patterns, three horizontal lines are taken across the body above the breast, between which eight lines go down to the waist narrowing gradually to a point; the naval is the centre of a Maltese cross; each arm, about five inches long, consists of three lines with a pointed finial. The leg tattoo is done with an admirable sense of fitness, that on the thighs consisting of close vertical lines and on the calves of horizontal lines, a small break occurring in each on the shin bone. This has the effect of increasing the apparent rotundity of the legs below the knees (Woodthorpe: 1876).

Thus while the men tattoo their face, the women do not. The tattoo on the body of the women is suggestive of the concept of clothes to cover the body. Again Badlgley, another topographer, mentions that the Eastern Naga men do not tattoo while the men from Tablung and Jaktung tattoo a single line above the forehead and nose, and two broad bands from the outer parts of the arms over the shoulders to meet in a point at the waist. At Mulong and east to Lungva and Joboka, they tattoo their face with small dots and lines and the body with bands as at Tablung. The men in the neighbouring villages also heavily tattoo with broad lines and dots as to give an appearance of being blackened. The women of all the tribes tattoo slightly on the body and from the knee to the ankle and at Kangching have three broad lines on the lower lip and chin (Badgley: 1876).

ET Dalton gives another significance of tattoos with the Nagas, east of the Doyang River, a mark of chivalry and bravery associated with the practice of headhunting, which in turn is a prestigious social sanction for marriage. He refers to the tattoo practice of those clans under the Abor Nagas such as Mithun, Tablong, Changnoi, Mulong and Joboka, where matrimony is allowed only to those men who made have themselves as hideous as possible by having their faces elaborately tattooed. To quote:

> The process of disfiguration is carried to such a length, that it has given them an unnatural darkness of complexion and that fearful look which results when a white man blackens his face. To this rite of disfiguration they are not admitted till they have taken a human scalp or skull, or shared in some expeditions in which scalps or skulls were taken. It is by no means essential that the skulls or scalps should be trophies of honourable warfare, or that they should be even taken from the bodies of declared enemies. A skull may be acquired by the blackest treachery, but so long as the victim was not a member of the clan, it

> is accepted as a *chivalrous offering of a true knight to his lady* [emphasis mine]. (Dalton: 1872)

So even terms of warfare and gallantry are associated with the woman who is given the prestige of 'the chivalrous offering' among the Abors. Besides the social sanction, a tattoo also determines his social position and allows him to assist in the village councils. It is said that when a head is handed to the Chief,[12] the latter confers the *ak* amidst great festivity, where pigs, cows and even buffalos are slaughtered for meat, with a steady supply of a rice-fermented drink (Peal: 1872). Those who are not tattooed lie in wait for stragglers, men, women or children. Peal wrote, 'All those who get heads, get the *ak* on the face; those who get hands and feet, get marks accordingly, for the former on the arms, for the latter on the legs. No two tribes have the marks alike', while some do not tattoo their face (Peal: 1872). Till the late 19th century old warriors with fearsome tattoos on their faces and bodies were seen in the district of Mon in Nagaland, while the warrior clan, the Konyak Nagas, held onto their age-old customs and traditions of headhunting. A man who could bring the heads of his victims during wars with the other tribes was entitled to have tattoos on his face and chest. The more heads the warrior collected, the higher his esteem in society (Peal: 1872). However, this practice is obsolete now.

Early tribal cultures trace their art practices to the magico-mythical world view of pre-historic times (Kamat: 2001).[13] Whether done to ward off evil spirits or for enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the body, traditional practices of body marking observe specific sets of rules while tattooing male and female bodies. The female body markings among the Naga tribes of Northeastern India used to begin at puberty, as a preparation for the marital engagement; they were later elaborated and consolidated with pregnancy. The male body impressions, on the other hand, began as a celebration of the attainment of maturity of the boy into a warrior and hunter. Thus, after every successful headhunting expedition, the warrior added a tattoo mark on his chest, declaring and affirming his status as a warrior. Traditional tattoos, which were a continual process lasting till the person's death, turn the body into a record of the events during a person's duration on the earth: they are justified through the eschatological beliefs of such societies. For instance, the Nagas traditionally believed that tattoo marks were a determining factor in the spirit world and decided their fate in the next world. They believed that, if there were no tattoo marks on the body of a dead person, his soul would become a ghost in the netherworld (Kamat: 2001).

The Aos use tattoos basically for clan identification, while the Angamis and the Semas do not tattoo. Ao women generally wear an 'x' mark on the forehead (interview on 10 February 2010 with Pongen, Ao, aged around 58 years, a farmer by profession). Akala Imchen, a mother of 61 years stated, as mentioned earlier, that tattoos mark a distinction between the rich and the poor (interview on 10 February 2010 with Imchen, Akala, housewife, aged 61 years, Dimapur). As far as the techniques and tools of the Aos are concerned, they use a bunch of plant thorns for piercing the skin and the dye used was sometimes a mixture of particular leaves and coal (interview on 10 February 2010 with Imchen, Imtimongla, College Lecturer, Dimapur College). This has been endorsed by N Chang who states that the Changs of Tuiensang District use tattoos for clan distinction and that only rich people, such as the chief's wives, could afford to have tattoos on them (interview on 13 February 2010 with Chang, government employee, aged 60 years, Dimapur).

Traditional tattoos of this region were an evolved art with a variety of significance ranging from high social status, ornamentation to spiritual beliefs, links with ancestors, deities or spirits, and cultural or group identity. Tattoos are an obvious way of signaling cultural or clan differences, and people often use it to identify, exoticize and ostracize others. Tattoos mediate the relationship between the people and the supernatural world. They serve as a shield to repel evil or as a means of attracting good fortune. As for example, in the face of the Burmese invasion in the early decades of the 19th century, the young Karbi or Mikir girls of Assam, besides taking refuge in the deep jungles and hills, are said to have tattooed a black line from the forehead to the chin, known as *duk*, so as to look ugly and save themselves from the atrocities of the Burmese (Phangcho: 2009).

In Nocte villages, men generally do not tattoo their faces or bodies while it is prominent in some. In the Laju, Tut and Dadom areas some men are tattooed on the face and chest. In the lower Nocte area very few men are seen with tattoos. However, tattooing of women is common in all the villages. This is perhaps because for the women it is done as a social practice to identify the various growing stages from a child to a woman, while for men it was associated with headhunting. The female tattoo is 'V' shaped with circular ends on the face, a feather design on the chest and stomach and zigzags on the neck. Women are tattooed on the arms and back. The designs are generally big stars with cross lines joining the ends (Dutta: 1978). The implication of these symbols would be interesting.

Face tattooing is a social practice of Laju, where a girl at the age of four or five years is tattooed with a diamond shape on the chin and a line is drawn

through it. In the lower Nocte area girls are tattooed after puberty. At Laju, after puberty the cheek and nose are tattooed with lines drawn from the two points of the labial joint and over the nasal bridge on to the forehead. Besides the face, tattoos are done in other parts of the body such as the chest, navel, thigh and calves of the leg with lines and dots. Tattooing on women at Laju is done by expert women called *binu*, who are paid in cash or in kind. However, in the Borduria, Namsang and Laptang areas it is done by the maternal uncle. In other areas it is done by an expert, a man or a woman. In Borduria, the ceremony performed for the tattooing of girls is known as *bong juong* (Dutta: 1978).

Tattoos of Northeast India are not mere art forms but are essential socio-religious and political practices. They play an important part in initiation rituals, marking the transition from one life stage to another. The most important function of traditional tattoos is therefore to provide a great tool for understanding traditional tribal societies, their rituals, customs, gender differentiation and way of life, so as to reconstruct or retrieve an authentic ethnohistory of the region. It is interesting to note that although they are often decorative, tattoos of this region send important cultural messages. The 'text' on the skin can be read as one's lifetime achievements, a commitment to a particular group or signifying bravery. With the onslaught of colonialism, effecting a crisscross of different cultures, the original meaning of tribal tattoos are often lost. Tattoos as a sanctioned cultural practice important for identification, ritual and adornment, are often misunderstood and misinterpreted because its messages do not necessarily translate across cultures. This particular aspect should be borne in mind when using colonial historiography to write ethnohistory. With Christianization of tribal areas, tattoos have become obsolete. Tattoos have thus become a dying art tradition and need to be preserved in the historical records, as the 'text' on the skin; particularly, through the use of anthropological tools to study the powerful symbolism of tattoos in the Northeast.

The above three sections on 'Retrieving the Woman in Assam', 'Woman Writers of Assam' and 'A Gender Perspective of the Text on the Skin in Northeast India' are highlighters to vast unexplored areas of research. 'Retrieving the Woman in Assam' has shown how through various historical phases the woman emerges, as a result of numerous forces and factors such as education, efforts of women social activists and political participation in the struggle for Independence, as an agent of change. Women writers of Assam in general have impacted change in many ways: first, through their writings and second, through their real-life situations as reflected in the literature. The change in the genre of literature by women on women is evident. What

prior to the advent of colonialism was focused on spirituality and patriarchal social norms for women, the ideals of womanhood, literature of the colonial period showed a new turn, the conflict between tradition, modernity and rebellion. The latter part of the 19th century reveals that issues on women came to the forefront. The post-Independence period showed a major drift to women's rights as human rights.

While most of literature in the colonial period was confined to upper-class women who seldom focused on the ordinary woman, women writers represented all castes and classes in the post-Independence period, adding new genres, such as plays, translated works, biographies and autobiographies to Assamese literature. The colonial period set the tone for this development through the real life situations of women like Vishnupriya Devi and Swarnalata Devi Baruah who remarried after they became widows, a bold gesture against social injustice in the 19th century. In the 20th century again, practical life examples are those of women such as Chandraprava Saikia, for instance. Hence, it is not merely the writings of the women themselves that underlined the need for just social change but the women themselves played a proactive role as agents of change. Writings by Nirupama Borgohain, powerful as they are from a feminist perspective, reinforced this aspect while women such as Mamoni Raisom Goswami defied social norms through their dress code and influenced society more powerfully through the characters in her novels. 'A Gender Perspective of the Text on the Skin in Northeast India' covers the dying art of tattooing as an inclusion of some experiences of tribal women, which cannot remain outside the purview of societies in Assam. Tattoos of Northeast India are essential socio-religious and political practices of the ethnic communities. This itself is a marker of social distinction between the societies of the plains and the ethnic communities. They form important tools for understanding traditional tribal societies, their rituals, customs, gender and social differentiation within a particular tribe and tribal way of life in general, so as to reconstruct or retrieve an authentic ethnohistory of the region.

Notes and References

Notes

1 Reference may be made to the French agent Chevalier's description in 1756 of a 'gentile' (Hindu) cult originating from Bengal and brought to Assam by a Bengali Brahmin, Ramasa

at a place called 'Sonnin'. He describes the Ahom king and his followers as having converted to this cult. To quote, 'There is no other race in the world as indecent as the one that inhabits Assem [*sic*]. They have no qualms about giving their own wives to the highest bidder' and watch acts of debauchery in public and 'the Police' refrained from taking any action (Dutta-Baruah: 2008). This statement represents the 'woman' as a commodity on auction. The statement seems too generalized and confusing. Though the place has been identified with Sonai, near the capital of Gargaon, it has been washed by floods and is no longer existent. It is also not known as to what cult he is referring to. Language and communication must have been definitely a great barrier in those times, considering the topography and the various dialects of the region for Chevalier to understand what was explained. His informers or interpreters may have been against the conversion itself and given him a misinterpretation. Again, the system of police was introduced in India only during the time of Cornwallis (1786–93), and could not have been 'a silent' witness there. Moreover, the condescending attitude of the white race is evident in his concluding statement on religion: 'They do not know enough the doctrine of their faith to be aware of other religions'.

2 Manuscripts containing primarily religious and other literary writings.

3 A Vaishnavite religious preceptor.

4 Sankaradeva, the preceptor of the Bhakti cult in Assam, preached through devotional songs called *bargeet*.

5 A religious institution of the Bhakti cult in Assam.

6 Various religious ceremonies and festivals related to Lord Krishna.

7 Women's titles all had a suffix 'ni' such as Phukanani, Saikiani and Baruahni. This suffix implies the wife, just as in Mrs Phukan, Mrs Saikia and Mrs Baruah of Mr Phukan, Mr Saikia or Mr Baruah. It is so easily used that it literally becomes their name itself and writers continue to use it that way. In this book the author has deliberately used the names without the suffix 'ni'.

8 Interview with Aparna Baruva, wife of Mukhyada Prasad Baruva, 5 May 2011. He even had the picture of the cover painted on a wall of his house.

9 Some of the titles of the books have been translated by Radha Bhuyan. The translations are not literal but approximate the implication for an understanding of the issues or themes taken up by women.

10 Described as a Daivajna or Ganaka family of solar descent, Daivajnas were upper-caste Hindus, expert astrologers and employed in high posts in the Ahom administration (Barua: 2000). Nalinibala writes that the Ahom kings brought as experts, families of Kheori from Kanauj and gave them gold threads, gold masks and gifted them large areas of land. *Kheori* means knowledge or learning or expertise (Devi: 1994).

11 Since the late 19th century, the electric tattoo machine and related technological advances in equipment have revolutionized the art of tattooing in the West, allowing a wide range of colour and designs. The traditional tattoos were permanent markings but modern tattoos could be removed with the help of new laser techniques.

12 Peal refers to 'Raja' but the term is not used among the ethnic tribes in Northeast India. Rather the term 'Chief' is more applicable.

13 Kamat states that the belief that the tattooed design would protect a person from evil forces is endorsed in Hindu myths. It is said that Vishnu imprinted the designs of the *shankha* (conch) and *chakra* (discus) on the hands of his wife Lakshmi, in order to protect her from evil forces.

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