

CHAPTER 4

ASSAMESE MEDIA AND WOMEN

The Fourth Chapter analyses the status and position of women in Assamese society and the role played by Assamese media towards the projection of women. Firstly, to examine the status and position of women in Assamese society various religious texts, cultural myths and stories and literatures of Assam have been discussed. Next, as Assamese media are the integral parts of the Assamese society, its role towards women has been discussed.

4.1 ASSAM: THE LAND OF RED RIVERS AND BLUE HILLS¹

“Assam is the land of the ‘Red Rivers and Blue Hills’”---Gazetteer of Assam

The word Assam is the Anglicised form of the Assamese word “Asom” (Axom)—which means ‘Uneven’ or ‘Unparalleled’. According to another interpretation ‘Asom’ is the phonetic variation of the word Ahom, a Tai Mongoloid race ruling over most of present Assam valley for almost 600 years till the advent of the British rule in 1826.

Assam, the gateway to the North-Eastern part of India, is often called the Land of the ‘Red Rivers and Blue Hills’. It is situated between the Eastern Himalayas in the North, South China and Burma in the East (now bifurcated by Arunachal, Nagaland and Mizoram) and present Bangladesh in the West (with Meghalaya standing in between)—all made it be segregated by the nature. Assam is the reservoir of mesmerising hills, dales and valleys with the mighty Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries flowing gracefully through variegated terrain—Assam has bore a typical gorgeous topographical sight. Its natural beauty is well stated through the works of Assamese literature thus:

The numerous rivers would appear small and serene in autumn and winter; but awesome and devastating in summer. The blue hills and green valleys bloom beautifully in spring with sprawling colourful fields smiling around. But

¹A land of ‘Red River’ because the mighty river Brahmaputra dominates the whole of the Assam Valley and the blue hills intersect most part of the state with their evergreen forests and blue haze.(Gazetteer of Assam:1971)

recurring floods submerge most part of the valley creating widespread havoc throwing thousands out of their hearth and home. Assam is therefore a veritable playground of Dame Nature in all her charm and gaiety, fury and caprices. (Chaliha:2008, p.13)²

4.2 ASSAM AND ITS PEOPLE

Assam region as a whole is inhabited by the heterogeneous population with distinguished languages, traditions, life styles, food habits and customs but share a greater affinity. Assam is the most populous state amongst the other states in north-east population of 31,205,576 persons consisting of 15,939,443 males and 15,266,133 females (as per the 2011 census)³. Sex ratio is 958. Total literacy is 72.19% comprising male and female 77.85% and 62.27% respectively. Approximately 80% people lives in rural areas mostly depended on agriculture and small scale farming.

TABLE 4.1 POPULATION DATA

DESCRIPTION	2011
Approximate Population	3.12 Crores
Actual Population	31,205,576
Male	15,939,443
Female	15,266,133
Sex Ratio	958
Literacy	72.19 %
Male Literacy	77.85 %
Female Literacy	66.27 %

Source: Census data, 2011^[4]

According to the 2011 census, there are 966,257,353 (79.80%) Hindus; 172,245,158 (14.23%) Muslims; 27,819,588 (2.30%) Christians; 20,833,116 (1.72%) Sikhs; 8,442,972 (0.70%) Buddhists; 4,451,753 (0.37%) Jains and 7,937,734 (0.66%) belonging to other religious communities⁵.

Assam is also inhabited by different Tribal groups, the inseparable part of the greater Assamese society. At present there are 23 tribal groups in Assam which are divided

² Chaliha Parag (2008). Assam: Through the Ages. In Deka Dinesh (eds.) Cultural Heritage of Assam. Dispur: Directorate of Information & Public Relations.

³ Assam Population Census data (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/assam.html> on 17.07. 2016.

⁴ Assam Population Census data (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/assam.html> on 17.07. 2016.

⁵ Religion Census (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>.

into two—1. The Plain Tribes and 2. The Hill Tribes. The Plain Tribes include--1. The Bodos 2. The Missings 3. The Rabhas 4. The Deoris 5. The Sonowal Kacharis 6. The Tiwas 7. The Barmans 8. The Hajongs 9. The Mech. The Hill Tribes included--1. The Dimasas 2. The Karbis 3. The Garos 4. The Hajongs 5. The Chakmas 6. The Hamars 7. The Lakher 8. The Mech 9. The Mizos 10. The Papi 11. The Chintang 12. The Nagas 13. The Kukis and 14. The Khasis⁶.

Except certain special occasions of amusement outside the family is normally a man's prerogative. The women folk, however, go out to witness rural functions such as *Bhaonas* (plays based on Vaishnavite novels or mythological stories), Bihu and Puja. Occasional film's show is a new development as in the modern drama. *Bihu*, and of late, *Durga Puja* are two major festive occasions for urban and rural Assam.

4.3 WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN ASSAM

The status and position of women in a certain society is judged by the life being lived by women in an environment—the environment should be worthy of to live long, healthy and creative life. It also depends on how significant role women play in the private and public sphere of society and a nation and to trace the status and position of women in any society, one has to study the social structure, cultural norms and value system as these are the important determinants which influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine the role and position of women in the society.

It is apparent that, the status and position of women in Assamese society and culture is an out and out reflection of the entire Indian society and culture. In this regard, Krihnan and Dighe, assessing the present status and position of women in Indian society remarks thus:

Unwelcomed at birth, yet referred to as Laksmi of the house; neglected in the childhood, yet worshipped as the virgin incarnation of Devi; given away in marriage in order to gain merit in the next world, yet valued for the material wealth she can transfer to her marital family. (Krishnan and Dighe: 1990)

⁶ *Socio Economic Profile of Assam* (n.d).

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/23521/6/06_chapter%201.pdf on 17.07.2016.

The Committee on status of women states that “status realised through roles. This brings into focus the rights and opportunities provided to women by the state and socio-cultural institutions to perform these roles which may not reinforce each other. (Dolly Phukan:2009, p.17)⁷

Being paternalistic in nature Indian Government has, no doubt, initiated certain efforts to recognise women as equal as men, safeguard their rights as humans. Moreover, in the Indian constitution, it is guaranteed in black and white, that there should be no inequalities among its people in respects of caste, creed, religion, sex, language etc. but Indian women’s lives continue to be subject of the pervasive discriminations and substantive inequalities. Mita Deka (2013) says, “.....women’s struggles in Assam, whether in private or public life, are no exception”⁸.

Indian society is, out and out, of patriarchal nature. Kate Millet regards the relationship between male and female, in all societies, as political, because that relationship has been based on power. Patriarchy takes the form of male domination over women in all areas of life, and the practice of male domination became so universal and so complete that it gets labelled as natural without any scope to be questioned. Indian women, from period of the Rig Veda or the Dhramashatras and the Manusmrti, have been living under strict constrains of patriarchy and patriarchal laws made by the religious scriptures.

Assamese society is not an exception to that, as there can be seen gender stratifications, inequalities between men and women. The values of patriarchy are sowed in the minds of the children, irrespective of sex, from their very childhood and that value structure is reinforced in later stages of life by education, social training, and also by religious and customary rules. This process continues from generation after generation making it more universal and unchallengeable. It gets more and more reinforced with the progress of time. By virtue of being masculine in gender, men possess and stick to the higher position than women in society. On the other hand, from cradle to grave, women are placed in inferior position. A girl child is not preferred or welcomed, she gets lesser facilities for development of her individuality,

⁷ Phukan Dolly (2009). Status of women in Assamese Community. In Lal Neihzovi (eds.) *Changing Status of Women in North-eastern States: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Prof. C. Lalkima*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

⁸ Mita Deka (2013) *Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond*. India: Sage Publications.

in some societies she is not even regarded as complete individual, she is regarded as unqualified or unfit for decision making at any level; domestic, social or political. In this regard it can be mentioned that Manu has identified a man to be perfect:

[...] when he consists of three persons united his wife, himself and his son; thus have learned Brahmans announced this maxim: ‘the husband is even one person with his wife (Manu)⁹.

According to V. Geeta (2002) girls, from their birth to death are taught to respect the male members of the family as well as of society and women from head to the foot, hold to the societal norms forever. Hence, it goes like disrespecting men is an offence, but wife beating, bride burning or dowry deaths or witch craft are the common practices. Violence against women, sexual harassment, rape etc. are found to be in prevalence in different degrees in all societies but these are being recognised as the normal occurrence. It is well stated below:

The attitude of the society towards women, the socio-religious taboos associated with women, women’s own attitude and awareness towards their position in the society and the duties, rights, liabilities of women towards the society and her family are the factors which determine the status and position of women in a society. (The North-East Network, 2004)¹⁰

So to speak, Assam, the Gateway of North East, an ample representation of the in vogue socio-cultural and political status of women of Assam itself in different period of history could be attained from the Assamese religious myths and texts, literatures in the form of Novels, stories, dramas and historian’s account in history books.

4.3.1 Myths and Legends

Myths and legends are said to be 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 god and the super natural in an active

⁹ Bader Clarrise (2002) *Women in ancient India: Moral and Literary studies*. London: Rutledge ISBN 0-415-24489-7.

¹⁰ Phukan Dolly (2009). Status of women in Assamese Community. In Lal Neihzovi (eds.) *Changing Status of Women in North-eastern States: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Prof. C. Lalkima*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

role with humans and animals and used by those aspiring to and legitimising power as a means to establish lineages. (Thapar:1993, as quoted Mita Deka: 2013)¹¹.

There are certain myths on which Assamese society is based and still guided by the same in the determination of separate spheres for men and women. In this regard Mita Deka describes about the story of Naraka elaborated in Kalika Purana where the power relation between the two sexes had shown in such a manner that separates the sphere of both men and women—men to the public and the women to the domestic realm which portrays the patriarchal nature of culture and society of Assam. Mita Deka (2013 p-2) writes thus:

The Naraka myth runs that the 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 from 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.

Women are represented as the Mother Earth which signifies the reproductive power of a woman and the role of rearing and bearing of children as Katyayani or Kamakhya associated with fertility and divine powers.

4.3.2 Literature

Sayed Abdul Malik, one of the most reputed laureates of Assam, in his “*Dhanya Nara Tanu Bhal*” (Assamese) which is based on the life of Srimanta Sankardeva, he referred to a Sudra woman named Radhika Shanti who attained the glory by remaining a chaste and proved it by successfully fetching water from the river Tambuwanti and pouring it to the embankment of the river to strengthen the embankment in order to save the village from flood (Mallik, S.A.:1998). Through the story the status and position of women in ancient Assam emerges which reflects the maintenance and adoration of Hindu *Prativrata Dharma* in Assamese society. Moreover, a higher status of “Ideal women” had been given those who remained chaste and devotees to their husbands throughout their lives and were regarded as Hindu goddesses. Tharu, with regard to Prativrata Dharma in Hindu context, says:

¹¹ Mita Deka (2013) *Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond*. India: Sage Publications.

[...] the image of a supreme woman who through her patience, will power, undaunting courage, and, love fulfils her *patibrata dharma* and becomes one with the Creator¹².

According to J. Nath, beginning from the Brahmanas, Smritis and Puranas some of which were composed as late as the 12th century A.D., the entire ancient and early medieval literature ascribes a low civic status to women. The available literature depict the picture that much emphasis was laid on chastity of women and widow re-marriage was condemned. (Nath. J.: 1992)¹³.

So, it's a fact that the status and position of women in Assamese society is, in no way, different from the other societies of India. The low position of women is also reinforced by the religious literatures written by the different saints of Assam.

4.3.2.1 Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam and Women

Sankardeva says, "*The dire illusions created by women—the most hideous of all illusions*". (Dev Goswami: 2005, para 24)¹⁴

Suppression of women in any society limits the prevalence of social harmony. For a civilised society to grow there should be enough congenial space—social, cultural and economic, for women to be more emancipated and liberated. In Assam also, like the other saints of India, Sankardeva, the Vashnavite saint of Assam, also designates women to be the obstacle for men to gain the spiritual advancements. It is well stated in the following:

Men thought about their own emancipation and looked upon women as distraction from the spiritual path. Sankardeva like many other Bhakti saints also discriminated against the women. In the '*Neo-Viashnavism*' women are

¹² *Theorizing the 'Woman's Text'* (n.d). Retrieved from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/18301/8/08_chapter%202.pdf. on 17.07.2016.

¹³ Phukan Dolly (2009). Status of women in Assamese Community. In Lal Neihzovi (eds.) *Changing Status of Women in North-eastern States: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Prof. C. Lalkima*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

¹⁴ Khangai Dr. Ravi (2012, July 2) Neo-Viashnavism and Social harmony in Assam [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://ravikhangai.blogspot.in/2012/07/neo-viashnavism-and-social-harmony-in.html> on 17.07.2016.

not allowed to enter in the main prayer hall i.e. 'Kirtan Ghar'.(Dev Goswami, Ranjit Kumar: 2005)¹⁵

The literature like Katha Guru Charit record that women are inherently selfish in nature, irreligious, addicted to sexual pleasure. It further records that Shankardeva who is sometimes recorded as comparatively liberal in his attitudes towards women are full of illusions and mesmerism and even a sudden look at a woman would destroy all sorts of devotion. According to him, therefore, a wise man ought to have tried to avoid companionship of women as far as possible. (Baruah, S.L.:1992)¹⁶

4.3.3. Property and Inheritance

The law is wholly masculine; it is created and executed by our type or class of the man nature. The framers of all legal compacts are thus restricted to the masculine stand-point of observation – to the thoughts, feelings, and biases of men. The law, then, could give us no representation as women, and therefore, no impartial justice, even if the present law makers were honestly intent upon this. -----Antoinette Brown (Blackwell) 1852¹⁷

Legal feminists insist on the point that law is gendered—it is sexist and male as most of the law makers are male and based on male values which put women in a disadvantageous position. So, in the stringent patriarchy society like India, where the Father of a Hindu family is adored as the Roman God of the pre-historic Roman Empire, the objectivity of law towards women can be questioned as Mackinnon says¹⁸ “law serves and exploit women”. According to the Manu, wives and off-springs of a particular family cannot have the property, except a son, but he has the access after death of his father. It is well stated in the following passage:

Manu said that three persons, a wife, a son and a slave are declared by law to have in general no wealth exclusively their own; the wealth which they may earn is regularly acquired for the man to whom they belong. So, in a male-

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Phukan Dolly (2009). Status of women in Assamese Community. In Lal Neihzovi (eds.) *Changing Status of Women in North-eastern States: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Prof. C. Lalkima*. New Delhi:Mittal Publications.

¹⁷Pandey A. (n.d) Feminist Versions and Law. Retrieved from www.bhu.ac.in/lawfaculty/vol31/akhilendra_FINAL1.doc on 18.07.2016.

¹⁸ Ibid.

controlled family females and offspring did not have property rights. The wife was placed into the set of possessions and slaves.---- As cited in Bhandari , A & Jaswani, U)

A daughter cannot claim for the property of her father, according to Manu. It is noteworthy that a family is composed of both the sons and daughters may be married and unmarried. Sons can have the survivorship, but a girl cannot have that except the stridhan.

Before the enactment of the Property Rights Act in 1956, like the other parts of India, women were excluded from the property rights in Assam also. But in spite of the fact that women are legally entitled to have a share in the parent's property, they hardly exercise this right either due to ignorance, or due to the fear of having strained relationship with their parents and siblings.

Mita deka in her article "Gender Disparity and Legal awareness in Assam" cited Tilottama Misra, where Misra (2007) stated the case of a Koch women of Assam where the woman appealed for the inheritance of her father's property, but the case was dismissed by the court on the ground that 'though the Koches are aborigines of Assam, they are governed by the Daya bhaga school of Hindu law.

So, above mentioned discussion has given estimation on economic status of women—which makes it clear about the economic dependence of women in Assam and may it be one of the causes of the sufferings and secondary status in the society. This is one of the indicators of the imbalanced power relations between men and women—represents mainly the powerlessness and helplessness of women in Assamese society. And this dependence is rooted in the minds of the men so deeply that most of the times they take the chance to exploit her physically and mentally. Sometimes this situation goes so adverse that women are violated and deprived of the normal life being left as a slave. There are some causes of violations against women given below:

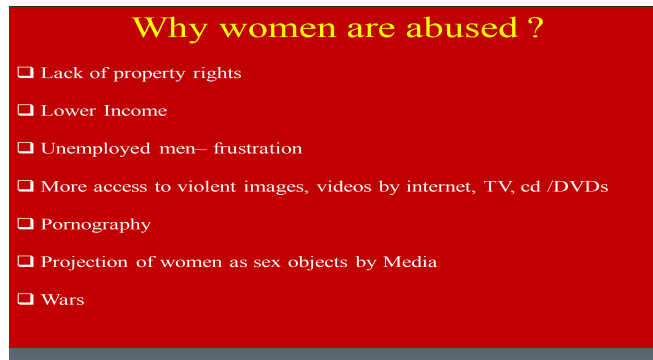


Figure 4.1 Causes of violation against women¹⁹

Dr. Jagjit Khosla in his research article “Gender Based Violence²⁰” pinpointed on some existing norms in our society which cause the occurrence of some violence against women in a particular society. Among them one of the important causes “Lack of Property Rights” has been shown as one of the causes of violence against women in the global as well as in India too.

4.3.4 Stridhana

The concept of *stridhana* was one of the core practices in India from the age of the dharamashastras. Now the concept of *stridhan* has assumed the shape of dowry of an Assamese in particular and in India in general. Mita Deka writes:

Over the next millennium, the scope of stridhana gradually expanded to include almost every category of property (Agnes: 1999). In upper Assam a corresponding concept for the security of the bride is Joutuk (Assamese version of the English word Dowry).

In the pre-colonial period indigenous Assamese women also were debarred from getting any property in her own right. The woman had right only to *Shridhana* or dowry given to her at the time of her marriage. This economic disability of women continued up to 1937 when the British Government enacted the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act and enforced it on all the Hindus of the country. By this Act a Hindu

¹⁹ Khosla Jagjit (2015) Gender based violence against women. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/drjagjit/gender-based-violence-against-women> on 16.07.2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

wife had the right of enjoyment of her husband's share in the jointly inherited property during her life time, but she had no right to alienate the property²¹.

Though these laws have given the rights to property as well as adoption to the Hindu women, in practice, the number of women exercising these rights is very negligible even in urban areas of Assam. The villagers are not even aware of these rights even today. Rightly speaking, Property Act has a very little field practice in Assam. *Gadhon* or *bride price* is another practice which practices in Assam and it is well stated in Mita Deka thus:

“Another practice prevalent in Assam is the “Gadhon” or “Bride price”, popular mostly in western Assam and among the tribal societies such as those of Koches, Tiwas or Lalungs, Dimasas or Kocharies, Bodos and Rabhas.”----
Mita Deka : 2008

The practice of “*Gadhan*” of Assam, which was also present in the age of Mahabharata in the name of “*Sulka*”, where would be son-in-law gifts according to the demands made by the bride’s father. The prevalence of this practice lowered the status of women as objects to be sold. It is stated in Chitravanu Sen,

“[I]n the Mahabharata narratives the system of payment of bride fees (*sulka*) figures prominently. Bhisma payas huge wealth to buy Madri for Pandu(1.105.5).” (Sen, Chitrabhanu: 2005)

4.3.5 Joint Family System

As in the other parts of the country the joint family system prevalent in the indigenous Assamese society and the eldest man of the family is accepted as the head of the family. In the rural areas of Assam the number of the joint families is larger. In the joint families the eldest male member is generally the head of the family; all the land and property of the family being recorded in his name. He prevails influence on all other members of his family and decisions taken by him are final in all matters connected with the household²². In the joint families men and women are

²¹Gazetteer of Assam, (1971). Retrieved from <http://online.assam.gov.in/web/guest/assamgazetter?webContentId=172302> on 12.05.2015.

²² Ibid.

differentiated in their roles and status, where men are regarded as authority, women are as subjects managing the household chores. It is well stated in the following:

The joint family discouraged public participation of women because the greater authority of older women prevented younger women from breaking out of traditionally approved female patterns. (Kumar & Varghese: 2005, p.158)²³

But it appears that the joint families have been now disintegrating rather rapidly. The number of the households in the villages has been increasing. Thus increase can mainly be attributed to the breakup of many joint families in the villages. But it cannot be said that joint family system is totally erased from the Assamese society.

4.3.6 Matriarchal system

The Hindus, the Muslims, the Jains, the Buddhists and the Christians of this State follow the patriarchal system of family and as such the father is the head of the family, at whose death is sons inherit his property. Among the tribes of Assam, the Garos, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Lalungs follow the matriarchal system of family in which the main rule is that the daughters instead of the sons inherit the property. Under this system, the major share of the property goes to the youngest daughter who is supposed to live in her mother's house along with her husband and children and to maintain the family. Other tribes of Assam like the Bodo-Kacharis, the Karbis, the Dimasa Kacharis, the Kukis, the Hmars, the Mizos and also the Shyams or Aitanian follow patriarchal system of family²⁴.

4.3.7 Dowry System

In ancient indigenous society of Assam, whether it is tribal or non-tribal, the bridegroom's family offered some cash, ornaments or other kinds as *gadhan* (price of the person) of the bride to the father or guardian of the bride. In case of tribal it was generally the price of methon (wild buffalo). Even now in some interior remote areas, this practice prevails, among the Mishings, Bodo- Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas etc. Generally ornaments, clothes, utensils including other household goods, cash, etc., are

²³ Kumar H. & Varghese J. (2005). *Women's Empowerment, Issues, Challenges, and Strategies: A Source Book*. New Delhi: Regency Publications.

²⁴ Gazetteer of Assam, (1971). Retrieved from <http://online.assam.gov.in/web/guest/assamgazetter?webContentId=172302> on 12.05.2015.

given willingly by the bride's parent. Every family or bridegrooms expects some utensils, ornaments, clothing and furniture to accompany the bride. These, however, remain the property of the bride. In Assam, a dowry though not compulsory, is known as Joutuk and in old times²⁵.

4.3.8 Inter-caste Marriage

Some decades ago caste endogamy was somewhat rigid among the people of Assam. In spite of this rigidity there took place some inter caste marriages. But now-a-days inter-caste marriage and inter-religion marriages are commonly accepted by all sections of the urban people specially the educated section. Spread of education, liberal ideas, economic independence of men and women, tolerance and many other factors are responsible for the break of this traditional custom. But it cannot be said that inter-caste marriage is totally accepted in Assam. In many villages of the rural areas of Assam, the inter-caste marriages are still considered a taboo. Any violation would lead to expulsion from the caste and the person concerned would be excommunicated by his own society²⁶.

4.3.9 Marriage of Widow

Among the caste Hindus the widow marriage is not favourably looked upon by tradition and custom. Though the Hindu Widow Marriage Act, 1856 has allowed such marriage in all caste of Hindus yet such marriage has hardly taken place. Even to-day, in the urban areas of the State, the percentage of widow marriage is very small. Among the scheduled tribes and poor peasants, however, widow marriage is allowed though no religious rite is performed in such marriage. Among the Muslims, the widow marriage is allowed by their personal laws and even then the percentage of such marriage among them is not high. The widow marriages are permitted among the Christians. The economically most backward castes or Scheduled castes who consider a woman helpful as an earning member generally accepted widow marriage. The State consists of people coming from different States of India and they generally follow their old custom in respect of widow marriage²⁷.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Gazetteer of Assam, (1971). Retrieved from <http://online.assam.gov.in/web/guest/assamgazetter?webContentId=172302> on 12.05.2015.

²⁷ Ibid

4.4 WOMEN OF ASSAM: SEARCHING THE SPACE OF THEIR OWN

The production of this work is to analyse the portrayal of women in Assamese print and visual media. So, to examine the media's role towards women it is important to understand first the status of women in Assamese society (in terms of intersection of class, caste and gender). The purpose of this research work is to stimulate a deeper understanding of the complexity of these intersections with respect to attitudes and norms associated with everyday practice. As such, this study will offer new insights on practices regarding gender and class in Assam. Second, it focuses on the key epochs and the associated socio-political implications that provide the backdrop to potential transformations in the status of Assamese women.

The great Assamese society is a small fraction of the wide Indian society which is caste/class ridden and patriarchal in nature. As a matter of fact, Assamese society is also in the grips of patriarchy, wide gender gap, gender inequality, low literacy rate, economically dependent, powerless, and many more. The research work of Mahanta and Nayak, on Assamese women reveals the facts that:

Only 11% of women in Assam participate in all the four household decisions making whereas in India the corresponding figure is 20%. More women of Assam are prone to sexual violence in comparison to India. When we analyse women's attitude towards wife beating, we find that less women of Assam support the cases of wife beating as compared to entire India. Women access and control over resource is far less in Assam (26.6%) in comparison to 50% in India (Mahanta, B.)²⁸.

The following passages will give more light on it:

Especially in the state of Assam, Domestic violence against unmarried women both in the rural and semi-rural and urban areas can be seen. They occur in high frequency in all parts of the state. Likewise marital rape and destitution

²⁸ Nayak P. & Mahanta B. (n.d) Women Empowerment In Assam . Retrieved from <http://dspace.nehu.ac.in/jspui/bitstream/1/2667/1/Women%20Empowerment%20in%20Assam.pdf> on 17.07.2016.

of women, which leads to trafficking and forced prostitution, are also serious issues in the state. (Sahu & Pradhan: n.d, as quoted in Gupta:2014, p.45)²⁹.

It is painful to note that in spite of theoretical constitutional equality for all (men & women); separate personal laws ensure that men and women are not equal. Male guardianship prevails even today and 'marriage' for women translates into subordination in ways it does not for men. Such paradoxes in the formal and informal areas continue to exclude women from an equal footing with men in free India. (Gupta: 2014, p.59)³⁰

Violence against women has been a rising factor in regard to North-Eastern state of Assam. A harsh rise in the cases sexual violence and harassment, even in the form of leering and taunting, leaves women in vulnerable positions within public spaces. The following will throw light on it:

The number of cases of domestic violence is the highest among all categories of cases of crime against women in the state since 2005. From 2005 to March 2016, at least 56,896 cases of cruelty by husbands were registered in the state, records stated. Around 2,200 cases of cruelty by husbands were registered in 2005. By 2015, this had risen to 9,553. A recent study by a local NGO, North East Networks (NEN), working for women's rights had also drawn attention to the horrifying situation in the state's rural areas. It found that 83.7% women were physically abused by family members, husbands or employers. The study also found that 34.1% women were forced into sexual intercourse. Besides undergoing physical abuse, women in rural Assam have been found to be facing verbal abuse by their husbands or in-laws for not bearing a child, especially a male child³¹.

It is well stated in Mishra:

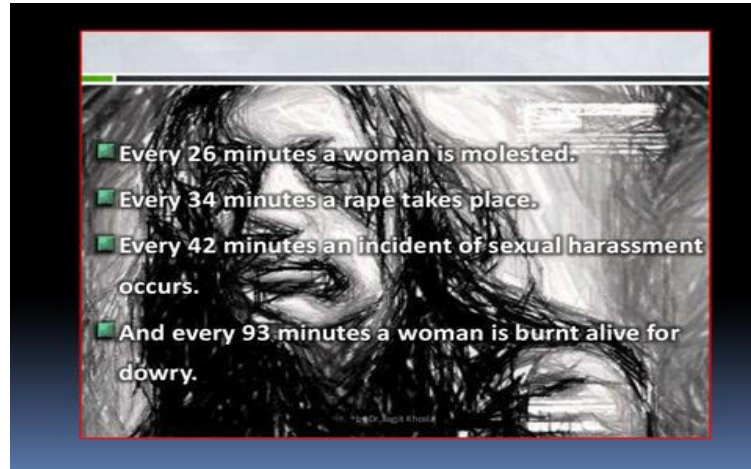
If, all the violence that have done on women, if we put them in a bundle and rolled into one, then

²⁹ Gupta N. (2014) Socio-economic status of women in Northeast India: Causes and consequences of domestic violence against women in Assam: Case analysis. *Shiv Shakti International Journal in Multidisciplinary and Academic Research (SSIJMAR)*. 3(2),2278-5973. Retrieved from <http://ssijmar.in/vol3no2/vol3%20no2.4.pdf>. on 17.07.2016.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Assam: *Instances of violence against women on the rise* (n.d). Retrieved from <http://thenortheasttoday.com/assam-instances-of-violence-against-women-on-the-rise/> on 17.07.2016.

Earth would not hold it
The sky could not enfold it
It could not be lighted and warmed by the Sun! (Mishra:2010)³²



*Figure 4.2 violence against women India*³³

Victims of certain kind of violence symbolise the ‘powerlessness’ of a certain groups of people in a society. It indicates the deprivation, denial and the secondary status of women in a male dominated society. Navneet Kr. Mishra says that violence against women is a manifestation of historically power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of all advancement of women. The occurrence of Violence in a particular society indicates the unequal power distribution—both physical and economic between the sexes: in patriarchal society powers are centred to men, all the institutions or organisations are male dominated signifies that women are insignificant in such a society.

Patriarchy can be seen everywhere in Assam. From birth to death women have to live in a strictly stringent patriarchal society in Assam. So, they live in a traumatic condition struggling for own space of justice and equality. Girl child is discriminated from her birth and is enforced to live the life of a second-grade citizen. In India, due to impact of some patriarchal institutions, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, the overall status and position of women are much lower than men; therefore a male child

³² Mishra Navneet (2010) Violence Against Women: A Research Paper. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/helloindia05/violence-against-women-research-paper> on 17.06.2016.

³³ Khosla Jagjit (2015) Gender based violence against women. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/drjagjit/gender-based-violence-against-women> on 17.06.2017.

is preferred over a female child. The impact of this can be seen in Assam also, According to 2011 census, in Assam, the sex ratio between male and female is 958. The whole scenario will be cleared from citation given below:

Women of Assam are still shackled to traditions, customs, age-old superstitious and beliefs, orthodoxy, dogmatism like witch hunting and conservatism. Purdah system, dowry system, early marriage, widowhood are still a strong part of women in Indian society in general and Assam in particular. They remain suppressed by their husbands, in-laws, spend most of their time in household chores and remain economically dependent throughout life and viewed as inferior in the man dominated society. In the joint families, they have no freedom, no privacy and no good treatment from the in-laws. (Devi: 2013, p.65)³⁴

In a patriarchal culture woman's ideals and images are made on the experiences of the men and are based on the masculinity. Assamese women are living the same traumatic life as the others are experiencing in India, being the victims of patriarchal crimes committed by men. One of the most revered Assamese religious literatures "*KATHA GUR CHARITA*" says, "*Women are inherently selfish in nature, irreligious, addicted to sexual pleasure.*" (Katha Guru Charita, as cited in Dolly Phukan: 2009³⁵). This sentence written in Katha Guru Charita by Assamese religious saints reflects the Manu's dictum that---

"Women are having habit of lying, wasting time, an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness and treachery and bad conduct".--- Manu (as cited in Chakrabarti, Uma)

"Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; thinking that it is enough if he is a man, they give themselves to the handsome and the ugly."(Manu)

³⁴ Devi T.M (2013) Women Status in Assam. Journal of Business Management and Social Science Research. 2(1), 2319-5614,pp.65-69. Retrieved from <http://www.borjournals.com/a/index.php/jbmssr/article/viewFile/169/1255> on 17.07.2016.

³⁵ Phukan Dolly (2009). Status of women in Assamese Community. In Lal Neihzovi (eds.) *Changing Status of Women in North-eastern States: Felicitations Volume in Honour of Prof. C. Lalkima*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

In *Satapatha Brahmana* it was held that a woman, a sudra and a crow are the embodiments of untruth, sin and darkness (Chakrabarti: 2003). Again it can be mentioned here that Srimanta Sankar deva, the Vaishnavite Religious Saint of Assam, though often he is regarded for his liberal attitude towards women, commented that women are full of illusions and mesmerism and even a sudden look at women would destroy all sorts of divinity and devotions. According to him.... *therefore a wise man ought to have tried to avoid companionship of women as far as possible.*"(Barua,S.L³⁶)

4.4.1 Class/Caste system and Society: Projecting women as inferior

"Dominance is based on wealth, that is, control over land, which also gives the dominant caste access to political power". (Chakrabarti: 2003)³⁷

"Stratification of societies is a phenomenon known to all civilizations living and dead as well. This is a direct result of class struggle and class exploitations of all the ages. The ancient Indian societies was not only stratified but also fossilized into different varnas and jatis, which were determined by birth. The varna system hierarchy in the caste system was established in the Vedic period."(Thakur:1992)³⁸

According to Ghurye (1969)³⁹, the following are the salient features of the caste system-----

- Segmental division of the societies.
- Hierarchy
- Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse.
- Civil and religious disabilities.
- Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation.
- Restrictions on marriage.

Figure 4.3 Features of Caste system⁴⁰

³⁶ Phukan Dolly (2009). Status of women in Assamese Community. In Lal Neihzovi (eds.) *Changing Status of Women in North-eastern States: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Prof. C. Lalkima*. New Delhi:Mittal Publications.

³⁷ Chakravarti Uma (2003). *Gendering Caste: Through Feminist Lens*. Calcutta:stree.

³⁸ General Description of the position of women with reference to the study Areas (2015). Retrieved from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/37459/9/09_chapter%203.pdf on 18.07.2016.

³⁹ Ibid.

4.4.1.1. Caste system

One of the basic attributes of the social structure of Indian society, and more specifically intrinsic to the Hindu religion, is the institution of caste that has gradually ramified into the jati system (Ahmad: 1999; Crompton: 1993). This system, as one of the stable and unique structures of Indian social institution, has been studied by a number of scholars (Ahmad: 1999; Chandra et al.: 2000; Crompton: 1993; Kapoor: 2007; Kumar: 2005; Gorringe & Rafanell: 2007; Nadkarni: 2003; Newman & Deshpande: 2007)⁴¹.

Though the initial *varna-jati* system of Assam conforms to that of all India, with the passage of time, there has been fragmentation in the *jati* system of Assam, through which a unique sub-cultural trait has evolved representing regional ethos, often forming splinter *jatis* within each *varna*. One of the earliest settlers of the region, especially those belonging to the Indo-European ethnic origin, comprising of *Kalita*, alongside the Brahmins as well as a sizeable section of Muslims (who came to Assam as soldiers and craftsmen of the invading armies of the Sultans of Delhi and Nowabs of Bengal (Taher & Ahmed: 1998) migrated over to and settled in Assam since 1205 A.D. (Kumar et al.: 2004). The *Kalitas*, who belong to the *Kshatriyas* (or *Rajputs*) are the earliest settlers in the region, followed by the Brahmins (Kumar et al.: 2004). These people brought with them Vedic culture, the Hindu religion and a higher technology of sedentary agriculture (Taher & Ahmed: 1998)⁴².

The genealogical structure of Assam also reflects the phenomenon of a tribe-caste continuum (Kumar et al., 2004). Assam is the hub of eight major tribes where the total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of the state stands at 12.4%. The whole non-tribal populace of Assam, who were mainly the tribals of yesteryear, (except the Brahmins, *Kalitas*, *Kayasthas* and few others) is concentrated in almost all the urban areas of the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valleys. It should be noted that it is actually through

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bhattacharjya R. (2009) Examining the Changing Status and Role of Middle Class Assamese Women: Lessons from the Lives of University Students. (Thesis, Degree of Doctor of Philosophy submitted to the University of New Castle). Retrieved from <https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10443/303/1/Bhattacharyya09.pdf> on 17.07.2016.

⁴² Ibid.

sanskritisation, a gradual process of transformation through adaptation of Hinduism and its way of life, that they have emerged into the status of the caste Hindu system⁴³.

Following are some of the practices that lower the women's position in Assam in all periods⁴⁴--

- (A) The concept of Hypergamous (anuloma) and hypogamous (pratiloma) marriages by definition denigrates women. A marriage where a boy of upper caste marries a lower caste was approved and called Anuloma. On the other hand marriage of women of ritually pure groups with men of lower rituals status doesn't receive a similar approval and known as Pratiloma. Moreover if a man of the low caste marries a girl of the high caste, then they were both considered as degraded and impure.
- (B) During the medieval Assamese society punishments like excommunication could be evoked for transgressing the norms. Women as a guardian of purity has not to lower herself but she could be raised high.
- (C) Another symptom is the differential status of bride giver and the bride taker, where the latter is considered to be always superior. Though the evil of dowry was not prevalent in the Assamese society, but the social status of the groom's party was always superior in comparison to the bride and her family. This is still following in Assamese society.
- (D) There was an important practice on women in Assam that determined social division of labour in Assamese society. The tasks for women were specific like men in Assamese society. In agriculture, for instance, women could engage themselves in water regulation, transplanting, and weeding, reaping, thrashing but not in plugging. Women of the upper caste were withdrawn from the outside work.
- (E) Although women of Assam or any other parts of India did not constitute a caste by themselves, yet they naturally took the caste of their husbands. Accordingly

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ General Description of the position of women with reference to the study Areas (2015). Retrieved from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/37459/9/09_chapter%203.pdf on 18.07.2016.

they had to follow rules and restrictions. For example tradition prohibited the Brahmins widows from eating on-vegetarian foods. Again one thing was common among the women of all castes that they were always considered as subordinate to male members.

(F) The recommendations and prohibitions for sudras (lower caste) and women were same on many occasions. For example, the prohibition of the Upanayana Sanskara for both women and sudras or denial of religious privileges for Sudras in Assam. This also points out the lower position of a woman in traditional Assamese society.

(G) There are some traditions for women also, prevailing among many castes in Assam, which were practiced during pregnancy, delivery period, menstrual courses, birth of a child etc. which were totally linked with status of women.

The traditional Assamese society followed a number of rites and used several charms during the time of her pregnancy in order to avoid the possibility of being attacked by the evils spirits. Even after the delivery, women were provided with a separate room for certain days and a dhai (care taker of the child and mother) of low caste assisted her and many more.

(H) Though the practice of child marriage was not so relevant and large in traditional Assamese society, yet it could not be told that it was not practiced totally particularly among Brahmin caste the tradition of “Aag Beya” was done before menstruate. It was due to the early child marriages at very low that could not provide proper education among girls, and also free movement hampered. The child rearing, caring etc. also had it be done from a very low ages.

Regarding the position of women in the ancient and medieval period of Assam history, it can be assumed that, as an integral part of the Indian society, the Assamese womenfolk were also guided by the same Indian beliefs and customs prevalent in other parts of the country. That is why; they had to accept everything like the other Indian women more or less.

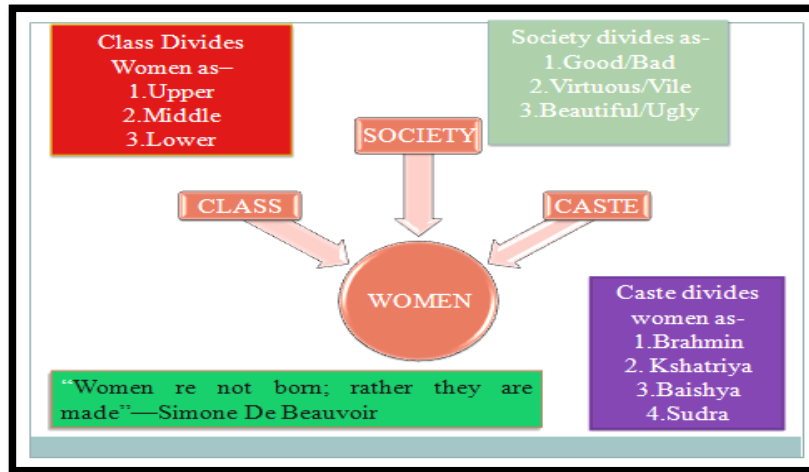


Figure 4.4 Divisions among women

One of the horrible things in a woman’s life is class or caste system and society as these systems divide the whole women sexuality into various categories such as on the class basis—upper, middle or the lower, in terms of caste, Brahmins, kshatriya, baishya, and sudra. These two systems perpetuate the bondages for women belonging to the so called upper caste by imposing a number of taboos on them. P.C Choudhury states:

[B]ut being an integral part of India, Assamese social life was also based on Varnasrama Dharma which is proved by ancient epigraphic and literally sources.” (Choudhury:1980)⁴⁵

4.4.1.2 Class System

Another important factor to consider in defining the socio-demographic profile of Assam is the historic legacy of the class system. The concept of social class is typically based on an understanding of property and employment stratification (Crompton: 1993). Such a framework has its roots in the political economy of Marxist Geography. Extensive discussion of class struggles appears in the prolific work of Karl Marx (1818-1883), who defined social class with respect to the notion of class consciousness. Marx viewed social class not only as a descriptive category but also as

⁴⁵ General Description of the position of women with reference to the study Areas (2015). Retrieved from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/37459/9/09_chapter%203.pdf on 18.07.2016.

a dynamic asset through which it was possible to understand the primary intersections and interactions of history and society (Lee and Newby, 1983; Marx, 1926⁴⁶).

The key pioneers of modern concepts of class are Nicos Poulantzas, Erik Olin Wright, Anthony Giddens and Frank Parkin. The class system in Assam is best understood with respect to the understanding of Giddens (1973) and Parkin (1972) rather than Marx. Both of these scholars embrace neo-Weberian ideas on class. Giddens (1973) divided the class system of a particular society (bearing in mind the cultural variations of different societies) according to the way possession of capital, educational credentials and labour power distinguishing groups within society. He defines this bundle of criteria as ‘market capacities’. Parkin (1972), by contrast, divides the class system of a particular society according to a narrow hierarchy of occupations. Although Parkin argues that possession of property can serve to convey social stratification, he identifies occupational status as a far more convincing criterion for distinguishing groups in a particular society⁴⁷.

4.5 ASSAMESE MEDIA: ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE PRINT MEDIA

The history of press in Assam has been fascinating study for the media scholars. The first printing press in Assam was introduced by an American Baptist Missionary in Sibsagar in 1836 AD and he published a series of pamphlets informing the public about the merits of Christianity and glorifying the biblical stories among the people of Assam. The only motto behind this was to propagate Christian religion in Assam. (Murthy: 1966).

As a part of the Iandabu Treaty of 1826, Assam came under to the British colonial rule. Being the part of this colonial rule Assam had experienced some remarkable changes in terms of social-political life and literature especially. In this particular period of time many journals were published which played an important role in developing Assamese Language and Literature.

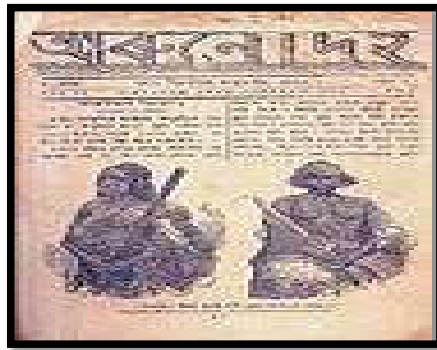
The first Assamese periodical ‘*Orunodoi*’ emerged in 1846 AD. Its first editor was an American missionary, Oliver T. Cutter. This journal has played a memorable role in

⁴⁶ Bhattacharjya R. (2009) Examining the Changing Status and Role of Middle Class Assamese Women: Lessons from the Lives of University Students. (Thesis, Degree of Doctor of Philosophy submitted to the University of New Castle). Retrieved from <https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10443/303/1/Bhattacharyya09.pdf> on 17.07.2016.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

shaping, perpetuating modern Assamese literature and gave introduction to the world about Assamese culture, societal norms and arts of Assam. The journal was regularly published for over 36 years. (Sarkar: 2013⁴⁸)

During the times of its birth the *Orunodai* was published in two sections—the magazine and the newspaper and the varying sizes of the two were maintained up to 1850. The number of the readership of the *Orunodai* proves that it became popular among the educated people of Assam, both Christian and non-Christian. In the beginning in 1846, 249 Assamese persons subscribed the papers the total number of subscribers came down to 440. In 1867-65, the number of subscribers went up to about 700. But after that period the numbers of subscribers are not available.



*Figure 4.5 Orunodoi (Sunrise)*⁴⁹

In the year 1871, the owner of the 'Auniati' Publication Sri Duttadeb Goswami Prabhu brought *Dharmaprahaks Tantra* from Calcutta for printing purposes, which is second printing machine. In 1871, *Assam Bilashini* was published as the second newspaper of Assam.

Assam Mihir was the first known weekly newspaper which was published in 1872, by the Chidananda Press from Guwahati. But due to the sufficient support it did not last long and in 1873 it stopped to publish forever. In 1876, Chandrodaya was another journal published from Nagaon. Chandrodaya, Sarkar has made an important remark that:

⁴⁸ Sarkar Dr. P (2013). The Press in Assam: An Overview. *International Journal of Arts Commerce and Literature*. 1(5), 2320-4370.

⁴⁹ Orunodoi (2012). Retrieved August 14, 2016, from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orunodoi>

It may be noted that the 'Chandrodaya' of the 'Dehing Tantra' was printed in Guwahati from the same Chidananda Press from which the 'Assam Mihir' had been brought out. It also could not be ascertained whether language of the paper was Assamese or Bengali⁵⁰.

Between the years of 1871 rooted the beginning of a new era of Assamese literature. The *Assam Darpan* was published from Tezpur in 1873-74, as a monthly magazine under the editorship of Lakshmi kant Barkakati. In 1876 another paper under the title *Assam Dipak* was published from the *Dharma Prakash Tantra* from Guwahati. This paper lived just for a year. During this particular period, the year of publication of the *Assam Bilashini* and 1876 of the publication as well as the closure of the *Assam Dipak* at least eight magazines and newspapers were published in Assam. But all of these magazines and newspapers did not exist longer.

The first daily newspaper of Assam was *Batori*. It was founded as a weekly in 1929 and in 1935 it became a daily and came to be known as *Dainik Batori*. The entire episode of it is well stated by Dr. Partha Sarkar thus:

During 1935-1940, many weekly newspapers appeared in the Assam region. Though they were short-lived but had played their respective part in the progress of Assamese journalism. Journalism in Assamese language has not developed for want of literacy and financial support. But now Assamese people have begun to take great interest in their language. More and more Assamese people are now feeling the importance of newspaper in Assamese language⁵¹.

At present Assam has become the rendezvous of many newspapers and periodicals published from in different languages. Among the English daily newspapers *The Assam Tribune*, *The Sentinel*, *The North East Times* are popular. Among the Assamese dailies *Dainik Asom*, *Aajir Batori*, *Danik Janmavumi*, *Aji*, *Ajir Ahom*, *Amar Ahom*, *Assamiya Khabar*, *Assamiya Pratidin* and *Danik Agradot* are popular. There are also some Bengali dailies published from Assam. These are *Dainik Jugasankha*, *Dainik*

⁵⁰ Sarkar Dr. P (2013). The Press in Assam: An Overview. *International Journal of Arts Commerce and Literature*. 1(5), 2320-4370.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Sonar Cachar, Samayik Prasanga, Silchar Times and Gati. Punbanchal Prahari and Sentinel are the Hindi newspapers published from Assam.

4.6 STATUS OF PRINT MEDIA IN ASSAM: THE PRESENT SCENARIO

The post-Independence was a transition period in Assam, which transformed the mediaeval Assamese society to a modern one. Alike in other parts of India, introduction of social reforms, removal of social abuses and formation of modern provincial literature and development of the language are the major factors that helped in bringing about changes in the outlook of the Assamese people. (Baruah: 1999, Sarkar: 2013, p.235)⁵²

Print media scenario in Assam like the other parts of India has undergone tremendous change in the last past few years. The recent causes of immediate changes are the digitization of the newspapers and the online versions. The multi edition English newspapers brought a change in the current trend of newspapers. Assam houses the publication ground for many English newspapers along with the local newspapers in different languages. Current English dailies are *The Assam Tribune, The sentinel, The north-east times, The north-east daily, The Eastern Chronicle* etc. published in multiple editions. National newspapers like *The telegraph, The Hindustan times* and *The times of India* made their entry to the northeast market with the launch of its Guwahati editions. The Hindustan times, however in the subsequent year ceased their publication. The present status of newspapers in Assam is that it publishes more than thirty newspapers, in English, Assamese and other languages. The city of Guwahati alone witnesses the publication of more than 20 morning dailies: half of those are in the Assamese languages. Most of the dailies are published from more than one centre, whereas three Assamese daily newspapers claim to enjoy around 1, 00,000 circulation. The prominent Assamese dailies are *Asomiya Pratidin, Dainik Janambhumi, Amar Axom, Dainik Agradoot, Asamiya Khabar, Dainik Batori, Dainik Janasadharan, Dainik Axon, Edinor Sangbad, Aji, Niyamiya Barta* etc. –have multiple editions to reach more readers in remote areas of Assam.

Until 1979, newspapers and magazines in Assam were largely focussed on social themes, with the editor and reporter treating journalism as an instrument of social

⁵² Sarkar Dr. P (2013). The Press in Assam: An Overview. *International Journal of Arts Commerce and Literature*. 1(5), 2320-4370.

change. The student agitation of the 1980s changed the face of journalism. Print journalism became aggressive and focussed on investigative reportage. Amidst all the turmoil and social chaos, the local media flourished. But the geographical location of the state proved to be the disadvantageous point for which media development could not scale to the expected height for years. With the entry of the electronic media there was a drastic change in the media scenario. It bridged the gap and reached different places without difficulty. The satellite television news channels in Assam are—*NE TV, News Live, Dy 365, News Time, Frontier TV* and the prime news offers 24×7 services. Both the print and visual media have contributed to the socio-economic development by creating job avenues through direct and indirect employment.

The difficulty faced by the newspaper industry of Assam is the transportation and connectivity with the different districts by the roadways. Special attention here is drawn to the road communication with the Barak Valley. As a result the papers published from Guwahati reach the next day. Same happens for the Brahmaputra valley also. The local Bengali newspapers are *Dainik Jugasankha, Dainik Prantjyoti, Samayik Prasanga, Janakantha* and *Eastern Chronicle* is the English newspaper published from the Barak valley.

4.7 COVERAGE OF WOMEN ISSUES

While women constitute the half of the population yet Assamese media, having been gendered in nature, women have not been given significant share in the headlines and even when they get coverage in the headlines, they are presented as victims or as an oppressed. In other words, women are trivialised and their issues get presented distorted and sensationalised.

One of the flaming problems regarding media is arising in the insensitive media coverage of the sensitive women's issues. Nava Thakuria (2005), in his '*A Media Minority? Women Journalists in Assam*' says though there is a boom in Assam in the field of media, while media is becoming the popular profession among the youths, yet women journalists remain as minority, searching space for representation in media in terms of participation and portrayals.

How credible and factual is the presentation of news is? The recent incident of the molestation of a girl in the heart of the city (covered later) throws light on

the unethical reportage by the media practitioners. The most astonishing part of the incident was that the entire episode was shot by a cameraperson of Assam's a leading channel News Live and the incident was telecast within half an hour as the so called 'breaking news.' (Thakuria: 2005)⁵³

In November 2007, Laxmi Orang, a tribal girl, was stripped naked by a mob in Guwahati and beaten up mercilessly. "I doubt the channels claim that two of their reporters were trying to save the girl. Nowhere in the video have we seen them," women rights activist Sheetal Sharma told *First post* from Guwahati over telephone. "Their camera focused on where the hands groped and how the hands slid through the girl's dress. Their story was on what the girl was wearing and where she went... The media is showing a complete lack of sensitivity by questioning the morality of the victim," she added⁵⁴.

Sheikh (1999) asserts, "Journalism have a special responsibility in shaping the image of women in media duo to their role as conveyers of message that contribute to shape people's opinions and feelings". Unethical journalism throws a negative light on various issues of society. Newspaper influences the opinion and can also create pressure group to resolve problems.

It is noteworthy that after the students' agitation in 1980, Assamese Print Media journalism has developed to a great extent and became aggressive towards the investigative reportage. But this growth does not bring any changes in the portrayal and participation of women in media. (Thakuria: 2005)⁵⁵

4.8 STATUS OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Over the last couple of years, with economic liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in 1990s, Assam has witnessed a mushrooming growth in the media sector. Despite this, women journalists remain a minority and struggling to find their place in journalism in Assam. And even when women get stepping in this profession,

⁵³ Thakuria Nava (2005). A Media Minority - Women Journalists in Assam. Retrieved from <http://www.comminit.com/media-development/content/media-minority-women-journalists-assam> on 17.07.2016.

⁵⁴ *Guwahati shame: The media and cops could have acted better, they didn't.* (n.d). Retrieved from <http://www.firstpost.com/india/guwahati-shame-the-media-and-cops-could-have-acted-better-they-didnt-377859.html> on 17.07.2016.

⁵⁵ Thakuria Nava (2005). A Media Minority - Women Journalists in Assam. Retrieved from <http://www.comminit.com/media-development/content/media-minority-women-journalists-assam> on 17.07.2016.

they do not get positions at the decision making level or in a position to influence in the formation of media policies. It is well stated in the following passages:

Newspaper proprietors prefer not to hire women journalists. If appointed, they are assigned mostly to desk jobs. Young girls, hired as reporters, are eventually transferred to the news desk after they get married," says Jullie Barua, a Guwahati-based photojournalist. Proprietors do not want to hire women reporters because they think women cannot cover the conflict-hit areas. (Thakuria: 2005)⁵⁶

Although women account for just a little-less than half the population of India, they are not seen as important constituents in decision-making positions, in government, the media, academia or traditional development agendas. Consequently, while women, especially the poor majority, often bear the brunt of the chronic problems which beset the country and, in addition, carry other burdens related to the gender-based division of labour and the general devaluation of women by society, they rarely make it to centre stage in the nation's affairs. (Joseph & Sharma: 2006)⁵⁷.

Like the other professions, Journalism has also been a patriarchal field for women to participate in Assam. Low wages, unfair labour practices, sexual harassment have been the unmitigated problems women journalists face in Assam. It will be cleared in the following passage:

[...] due to prevalence of gender dynamics and security issues, women journalists either need to be content with fewer opportunities than their male counterparts in this field or leave their jobs. Factors such as discrimination in work allotment, poor working environment, inadequate sanitation facilities are some of the difficulties that women have to encounter in their profession. In addition to these the absence of clear guidelines and in-house policies regarding maternity leave also pose problems for married professionals. In the absence of an appropriate institutional framework it becomes an arduous task

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Chakravarti Dr. J., Hazarika Mukhtikam, Goswami A. (2015). Engendering Media Participation: The Case Of Women Journalists In Assam. *Global Media Journal – Indian Edition*, 6(1), 2247-5835. Retrieved from http://www.caluniv.ac.in/global-mdia-journal/ARTICLE_JUNE_DEC_2015/Article7.pdf on 17.07.2016.

for female journalists to consolidate their position within the organization and work towards career growth⁵⁸.

4.9 ASSAMESE CINEMA

Assamese cinema is cinema in the Assamese Language, watched primarily in Assam. The industry was born in 1935 with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's initiation of his first Assamese movie *Joymati*. Since then Assamese cinema has developed a slow-paced, sensitive style, especially with the movies of Bhavendra Nath Saikia and Jahnu Barua. However despite its long history, and its artistic successes, for a state that has always taken its cinema seriously, Assamese cinema has never really managed to make the breakthrough on the national scene despite its film industry making a mark in the National Awards over the years. Although the beginning of the 21st century has seen Bollywood Style Assamese movies hitting the screen, the industry has not been able to compete in the market, significantly overshadowed by the larger industries such as Bollywood⁵⁹. (Wikipedia)



Figure 4.6 “*Joymati*”⁶⁰

In spite of the lack of trained technicians, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, while making his maiden film, moved heaven and earth to convert the impossible to possible. In accordance with this situation he had to bear the added responsibilities as the script writer, producer, director, choreographer, editor, set and costume designer, lyricist

⁵⁸ Chakravarti Dr. J., Hazarika Muktikam, Goswami A. (2015). Engendering Media Participation: The Case Of Women Journalists In Assam. *Global Media Journal – Indian Edition*, 6(1), 2247-5835. Retrieved from

http://www.caluniv.ac.in/global-mdia-journal/ARTICLE_JUNE_DEC_2015/Article7.pdf on 17.07.2016.

⁵⁹ Assamese cinema (2013). Retrieved August, 14, 2016, from Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assamese_cinema.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

and music director. The film, completed with a budget of 60,000 rupees was released on 10 March 1935.

In the face of lots problems and adversary, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala made his second film *Indramalati* in the year 1939. With the passing away of Jyoti Prasad, the Assamese film scene witnessed a temporary lull for about a couple of years. But situation was changed with the onset of World War II. Being taken heart of this situation some Assamese people came forward to make Assamese films. In this regard, names of Rohini Kumar Barua who made a film on a relevant historical topic called *Monomati* in 1941, Parvati Prasad Barua made *Rupahi* (1946), Kamal Narayan Choudhury made *Badan Barphukan* (1947), Phani Sharma made *Siraj*, Asit Sen made *Biplabi*, Prabin Phukan made *Parghat* and Suresh Goswami made *Runumi* should be taken⁶¹.

The most remarkable film of the 50's was *Piyoli Phukan* on the freedom fighter of Assam, which was produced by Gama Prasad Agarwala, directed by Phani Sarma and was music composed by Bhupen Hazarika. This film won a National award. In 1955, Nip Barua made his directorial debut with *Smritir Parakh*. His subsequent films *Mak Aru Maram* and *Ronga Pulice* won many state awards and the silver medal at the national level. Bhupen Hazarika also produced and directed his first film *Era Bator Sur*. Prabhat Mukherjee made a film on the universality of mother-hood, *Puberun* (1959), which was shown in The Berlin Film Festival.

In 1960s one of the most notable films *Lachit Borphukan* was made by Sarbeswar Chakrabarty. In 1961 Bhupen Hazarika made his unforgettable musical *Shakuntala* which was successful with both the critics and press and won the president's Silver Medal. In this particular period of time several important films got released such as Nip Barua's *Narakasur*, Anil Choudhury's *Matri Swarga*, Brojen Barua's *Itu Situ Bahuto* and *Mukuta* and Anwar Hussain's *Tejimala* etc. It is noteworthy that between 1935 and 1970 the films produced was totalled in no of 62. Besides the aforesaid film makers, there were other film makers who were also engaged in film making during this period such as Pravin Sharma, Saila Barua, Abdul Mazid, Amar Pathak, Indukalpa

⁶¹ Assamese cinema (2013). Retrieved August, 14, 2016, from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assamese_cinema.

Hazarika, Brajen Barua, Diban Barua, Debkimar Basu, Amulya Manna, Gauri Barman, Atul Bardolio, Sujit Singha, Nalin Duara and Prafulla Barua.

During the period of 1970-82 total 57 Assamese films were made. New directors were started appearing in the horizon. In this regard several names should be taken such as Samarendra Narayan Deb's *Aranya* (1970), Kamal Choudhury's *Bhaity* (1972, the first colour film of Assam), Manoranjan Sur's *Uttaran* (1973), Prabin Bora's *Parinam* (1974), Deuti Barua's *Bristi* (1974), Pulok Gogoi's *Khoj* (1974), Padum Barua's *Gonga Silanir Pakhi* (1976), Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Sandhya Raag* (1977) and Atul Bordoloi's *Kollol* (1978) are films of worth mentioning.

Notable directors of contemporary Assamese cinema are Jahnu Barua (who directed *Aparoopaa*, *Papori*, *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai*, *Bonani*, *Firingati* and *Xagoroloi Bahudur*); Sanjib Hazarika (*Haladhar*, *Mimanxa*) and Bhavendra Nath Saikia who directed *Sandhya Raag*, *Anirbaan*, *Agnisnan*, *Sarothi*, *Kolahal*, *Abartamaan*, *Itihaas* and *Kaal Xondhya*). Other directors include Santana Bordoloi who directed *Adajya*, Bidyut Chakrabarti who made *Raag Biraag*, both of which have won national and International Awards respectively, and Manju Borah with her multiple award winning films such as, *Baibhab*, *Akashitarar Kathare*, and *Laaz*.

It is worth mentioning here that films from the period from 1935 to the early 1990 were mostly Art films. The base of making commercial films was started from the Brojen Barua's film *Dr. Bezbarua* in 1960. Accordingly, some directors of Assam of the late 1990 came up with many commercial films. Directors like Munin Baruah came up with many commercial films like *Hiya Diya Niya*, *Bidhata*, *Nayak*, *Kanyadaan*, *Daag*, *Mon*, *Rang*, *Priya O Priya*, *Bukur Majot Jole*, *Kadambari*, *Koka Deutar Ghor Juwai*. Das observes:

“Jouvane Amoni Kore” which was a commercial hit of late 1990's was turning point in Assamese film industry. The grand success of Jouvane Amoni Kore was followed by the trends of commercial film making.. Other directors of that period was Chandra Mudai whose film “Maghot Mamanir Biya”, which was a commercial hit of its time. Even singers like Zubin Garg also came up with commercially hit movies like Tumi Mur Mathu Mur,

where he himself was the film director, the music director and also played the role of the lead character in the movie.” (Das: 2010)⁶²

4.10 ASSAMESE CINEMA: CONCEPTUALIZING MASCULINITY

It's noteworthy that in the Jyotiprasad era, it is Jyotiprasad himself, heralded the advent of the Assamese cinema with two films-- *Joymati* (1935) and *Indramalati* (1939). In both the films women characters were shown according to the patriarchal norms and values being present in Assamese society and culture. It is known to all that patriarchy insists on the norm that men and women are different in terms of biological and socio-cultural perspectives. It was a great challenge for him to find female actors for the role of *Joymati* as the then Assamese society was so much conservative about women. The Assamese society did not permit a woman to play with male actors. But still Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, blended well with his ideology and principles could make the film in spite of the social obstruction. In this regard Padum Barua observes:

Jyoti Prasad, at a time, when even on stage the women characters were played by men, he successfully made women act in front of the camera. Except Swargajyoti Barua, who played Dalimi in *Joymati*, all other actresses like Aideo Handique, the heroine and Mohini Rajkumari, who played the queen mother, were originally village girls⁶³.

In *Joymati*, the leading woman character was shown as patriotic and strong. In Assamese society the name of *Joymati*'s is taken for her adoration and dedication, as *Joymati* just did that what a patriarchal society seeks woman to do to save her husband. She gave preference death then to cheat her husband. She had been killed by the soldiers of 'Lora Roja' not to tell where Godapani was escaping. This symbolises the social norms regarding women in the pre-independent Assam which indicates the secondary and inferior status of women in Assamese society. The following passage will clear it:

⁶² Das R. (2010). Assamese Films And Its Present Scenario [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://rosydas.blogspot.in/2010/11/assamese-films-and-its-present-scenerio.html> on 15.07.2016.

⁶³ Origin, Growth and development of Assamese cinema and the importance of women characters, and their representation in Assamese films through the decades (Chapter II) (n.d). Retrieved from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/55929/7/07_chapter%202.pdf on 16.07.2016.

Media plays a vital role in the projection and construction of masculinity. Media projects man as the action hero with guns [...] they are also shown as economically successful and as passionate about social work. In films, we can see that the hero can always fight. He has a masculine body and he is physically strong. He is portrayed as a one man army and he alone can fight with hundreds of villains⁶⁴.

After Agarwala era there were lots of other directors emerged who made films based on historical stories and freedom struggle of India. As a matter of fact, being a part of the greater patriarchal socio-cultural set up, Assamese media cannot be seen as an exception to that of the other institutions. Male characters were shown as the freedom fighters, farmers having responsibility towards the family and the community, whereas women were mainly confined in the private sphere. It is well stated in the following:

In Assamese cinema, the male protagonist would be traditionally portrayed as a farmer wearing traditional *suria* (a kind of dhoti) [...] terrorist and freedom fighters. The characters depicted in this manner were generally shown to have a strong organic relationship with the life and community around them⁶⁵.

Now the trend has changed with the coming of the VCD films in Assam. Saikia⁶⁶ examining the representation of women characters in Assamese VCD films finds that most of the women characters in terms of those characters representing rural women are shown as submissive housewives, helpless widows, soft and kind in nature and dependent on the other hand the urban women are depicted as independent and aggressive. In most of the Assamese VCDs women's body and beauty are shown to entertain the male gaze.

4.11 PRESENT SCENARIO OF ASSAMESE CINEMA

After 75 years of existence, Assamese cinema has not got its due importance.

At present, piracy is killing the prospect of Assamese cinema and so it must be

⁶⁴ Dutta P. (2015). Representation of Masculinity in Assamese Films. Praxis an e-journal of Cultural Studies, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.tezu.ernet.in/dtcaf/facility/praxis%201.pdf> on 16.07.2016.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Saikia S.P (2015). Stereotypical Representation of Women in Assamese Popular VCD Films with Special Reference to *Jonbaai*. Praxis an e-journal of Cultural Studies, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.tezu.ernet.in/dtcaf/facility/praxis%201.pdf> on 15.07.2016.

stopped. And the future of Assamese cinema will depend on the audience. The audience must go to the hall to enjoy cinema.⁶⁷

The Assamese Film Industry which had the glory of releasing 20 films in a year⁶⁸ now the whole industry is dependent on the VCDs for asserting its existence. By the year 2005 VCDs entered into the scene of the entire Assamese Film Industry with the *Jun Bai* by Pabitra Margherita and followed large number of VCDs later. It is well stated in the following:

“The problems of the Assamese film industry are in plenty and it is not even an industry yet, in spite of its eight decades of functioning”⁶⁹.

Film Journalist and Jury Member of many International Film Festivals, Utpal Borpujari speaks about its problems at a film and literary meet in Guwahati in 2013 saying that, limited screening space and limited market are arguably the biggest problems facing by the Film Industry of Assam⁷⁰.

Writer Hare Krishna Deka, speaking at a seminar on Assamese cinema in 2007 says:

I feel there is a need to have a fresh look at touring cinema in Assam. It has to be reorganised and a system of networking has to be adopted. The Assamese cinema may take a leaf out of the book of Mobile theatre of Assam....many will argue that since only 16mm format suits touring cinema, this idea is impractical on these days of 35mm cinema. But since it is a question of survival for an almost dying industry, it better survives first, by using 16mm format and then go for 35mm films⁷¹.

Another important factor for the break-down of the Assamese film Industry is the insufficient and unsecured condition of the halls to get released. And which are available they do not want to release Assamese films. So, in most of the theatres in

⁶⁷Jatin Bora delivering his speech as the chief guests in the open meeting of opening programme of Silver jubilee celebration Assam Sahitya Sabha at Bordihingia Natyamandir Kamargaon on March 10.

⁶⁸ Das R. (2010). Assamese Films And Its Present Scenario [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://rosydas.blogspot.in/2010/11/assamese-films-and-its-present-scenerio.html> on 12.09.2015.

⁶⁹ Origin, Growth and development of Assamese cinema and the importance of women characters, and their representation in Assamese films through the decades (Chapter II) (n.d). Retrieved from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/55929/7/07_chapter%202.pdf on 14.07.2016.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Assam films from Kollywood, Tollywood or Bollywood are released and these films take the market of Assam. It is well stated in the following:

In the eighty years of Assamese cinema, though National award and International recognitions have come to its films and film makers on a regular basis, but the success of a good meaningful cinema has not been taking the market of Assam. In spite of the growing support from the Government, the film fraternity and effectual efforts by Assam State Film Finance and Development Corporation (ASFFDC), the producers and the film makers have not succeeded to pull crowd to the halls.

In this regard one of the most important is the quality of the films which has to be improved and maintained in Jollywood. Because that is the only way out to keep Assamese cinema in the hearts of Assamese people. Das says⁷²:

[...] at the same time, there are some factors which I feel are equally important in this regard, like----

1. Strength of storyline
2. Picture quality
3. Skilled and flawless direction
4. Budget(the most crucial one)”

But in this time of plights there are some rays of hope ignited by some Assamese directors, whose film are getting National and International recognitions. In this regard names like M. Maniram who made ‘*Mon Jai*’ in 2009 which got a National Award, Sanjiv Sabhapandit made ‘*Jatinga Ityadi*’ should be mentioned. This film was screened in the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) 2007 in the Indian Panorama section. Monju Borah’s film ‘*Aai Kot Nai*’ was selected for the Nargis Dutt Award for best movie on National Integration. Inspired by the works of these film makers the present film makers of Assam are coming forward with their new films such as *Ramdhenu* by Munin Barua, *Jetuka Pator Dore* by Jadunath Dutta, *Samiron Bhuyan Ahi Ase* by Pradyoot Kumar Deka etc.

⁷² Das R. (2010). Assamese Films And Its Present Scenario [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://rosydas.blogspot.in/2010/11/assamese-films-and-its-present-scenerio.html>.

4.12 CONCLUSION

Concluding it can be said that Assamese society is no way different from that of the other parts of the world as there can be seen gender stratifications, inequalities between men and women. The values of patriarchy are sowed in the minds of the children, irrespective of sex, from their very childhood and that value structure is reinforced in later stages of life by the other socio-cultural institutions. Assamese media is not exception to that of the other patriarchal institutions. Even though the Assamese media—print and visual, are an integral part of Assamese socio-cultural institutions serving Assamese people irrespective of caste, language and religion over the years, but the attitude of media towards women in regard to portrayal is a matter of concern from feminist perspective due to the growing negative trend to cover the women issues, trivialisation of womanhood and stereotypification of women. While women constitute the half of the population yet Assamese media, having been gendered in nature, women have not been given significant share in the headlines and even when they get coverage in the headlines, they are presented as victims or as an oppressed. In other words, women are trivialised and their issues get presented distorted and sensationalised. One of the flaming problems regarding Assamese media is arising in the insensitive media coverage of the sensitive women's issues. Like the other professions, Journalism has also been a patriarchal field for women to participate in Assam. Low wages, unfair labour practices, sexual harassment have been the unmitigated problems women journalists face in Assam: women journalists remain a minority and struggling to find their place in journalism. And even when women get stepping in this profession, they do not get positions at the decision making level or in a position to influence in the formation of media policies. In the films, male characters are shown as the freedom fighters, farmers having responsibility towards the family and the community, whereas women are depicted confined mainly in the private sphere. As a matter of fact, being a part of the greater patriarchal socio-cultural set up, Assamese media cannot be seen as an exception to that of the other institutions of the society.