



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

Volume-I, Issue-IX, October 2015, Page No. 12-17

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Status of Women in the Period of Pre-Ahom Assam: A Study in a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Women constitute almost half of the population in the world. However, their enjoyment of rights equally with that of men is far from satisfactory. In every society from ancient to modern times, women are considered as the property of men to serve their interest in both society and domestic front. They were denied the opportunities of education and refinement. The position of women in ancient Assam was not uniform. While Dharma sastras advocate a high position for women, yet it was difficult to determine whether the women get the actual position or not. With a patriarchal mindset that was predominant in the society of ancient Assam, women were generally discriminated. Role of women were confined to her being a wife and a mother as has been depicted in the inscriptions. Yet the historiography on that period confined the study of women to a single chapter or sometimes only a footnote. This paper made mainly an attempt to determine the roles played by the women in the different stages of her life in pre- Ahom Assam.

Key Words: women, rights, discriminated, position, role.

Introduction

Assam is a state situated in the North Eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. The earliest name of Assam is Pragiyotisha. All the ancient records mention a race of people called the Kiratas living on the Himalayan borders and also in Assam. The word Kirata, in a general term referring to the people of Mongolian origin and it refers specially to the Tibeto-Burman speakers. Many attempts have been made by scholars to reconstruct the history of this region. However till date not much work has been done to access the position of women during the period. For depicting a picture of the social position of women of ancient Assam, the historical materials at our disposal are meager and confused. We have to depend primarily on the data supplied by the epigraphic sources, but a few literary texts have been brought into the field and freely used by some of the previous writers. Except a few women of the upper classes, the lives of general women were not worth living. In short, the access to social justice and equality were denied to them. The growth of Brahmanical ideas and social restrictions impose on women in the society further deteriorated the position of women. One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitation is to study the history of the position of women. The true worth of a civilization can be assumed from the status of women in the society of that time.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study are

- To determine the status of women in the society of Assam in the Pre- Ahom period.
- To determine the different roles played by women in the different stages of her life.

Hypothesis:

The following hypotheses have been undertaken for the proposed work and will be tested in the course of the study-

- In ancient times a woman considered motherhood as the outstanding aim of her married life.
- The position of women in different aspects of society was not uniform.
- Women were worshipped in ancient Assam in the form of Sakti, the divine energy of God

Methodology

Historical methodology has been followed in the research work. Primary sources like inscriptions issued by rulers of Assam, Sculptures, literary sources like the Kalika Purana, accounts of foreign travelers and other materials remains have been studied in depth. These are supplemented by consulted secondary sources like the published works of scholars, journals as well as Report of the Directorate of Archeology, Govt. of Assam and Annual Reports of the Archaeological Society of India etc.

Review of literature

Although women played an important role in the society of Assam, till date there has been no concerted study focusing upon the position of women in ancient Assam. In the “Comprehensive History of Assam Vol-1” edited by H.K.Barpujari (2004), the position of women is the focus of only a small chapter. Similarly S.L.Barua’s (1997)” A Comprehensive History of Assam” and N.N.Vasu’s (1922) “Social History of Kamarupa Vol-1”,contains a limited discussion on the social position of women.P.C.Choudhury (1959) in his” The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.” discusses marries and other status of women in the society of ancient Assam very briefly. B.K.Barua’s (2003) “Cultural History of Assam Vol-1” while discussing the position of women takes into account only the literary sources. Similarly N.Lahiri (1991) in her “Pre-Ahom Assam” confines her discussion on women’s position to the evidence of only the inscription. R.M.Nath (1978)”The Background of Assamese Culture “have also contributed to the field of ancient Assam as a source. However it didn’t give adequate attention to the status of women in that period. All the above studies couldn’t focus vividly on the position of women in ancient Assam. As such an attempt has been made through this paper, taking help from archaeology and corroborative literary sources to proper focus on the status of women in the pre –Ahom period.

Discussion

Status of women in family life

The smallest unit of society was probably the joint family or large household. According to Rig-Veda the position of women is very high in the Hindu family¹. The Hindu conception of married life whether followed in practice or in principle has made women a co-partner of her husband in the spiritual and temporal affairs, known as ‘grahalakshmi’ or ‘sahadharmini’ or ‘ardhangini’².It has

¹ K.Roy: Women in Early Indian Societies, 2001, P.50.

² N.D.Choudhary: Historical Archaeology of Central Assam, 1985, P.146.

been considered that chastity and devotion to her husband as the two main great ornaments of a women's character. Women possessing good qualities and education are required for a happy domestic life and training of their children. Marriages therefore, has been deemed as a very sacred institution and it has been attributed a high spiritual value. The wife enjoyed with her husband full religious rights and regularly participated in religious ceremony with him and thus the Rg-Veda accorded the highest social status to that qualified women of the days.. In ancient times a woman considered motherhood as the outstanding aim her married life as indicated by the inscription from Assam. Women were worshiped in ancient Assam as mother. Sakti is the divine energy of God. The land of Mother worshiped has a message to the world for the regeneration of mankind. That is the message of spirituality the message of peace through the propagation of the cult of motherhood. This mother is peace and peace is mother. In this above reference it states that the role of mother in the society is very high. She was worshiped in different aspects as the symbol of peace. According to Rg-Veda³. The position of the wife is very high in the Hindu family. She is to be head of the family or household bearing full sway over the father-in-law and mother-in-law, over her husband's brothers, sisters and others. A place of honour and respect was accorded to women in the Epic period; they were considered pivots not only of domestic life but of the entire society. However a wife's right of ownership became a limited one. Women's right over her husband property was that of a caretaker and not of a proprietor. Her right was only over Stridhana. For a long time widows were not recognized as heir because Niyoga was a common practice. Even she could get her husband's share in family property not as a direct heir but as a guardian of her minor son's⁴. Many of the practices that were to lead to the depreciation of women's status among the higher castes had their roots in the slightly later era of the Brahmans and Upanishads. The increasing complexity of Brahmanic ritual during this period preface a shift in the centre of education from the family home to that of the teacher, with the concomitant effect that women were increasingly alienated from education. The result of this alienation was that the Vedic idea of man and wife as partners in the religious rituals of hospitality and worshiped was undermined, and women's social role was redefined to emphasize only her reproductive function, leading to the increase popularity of early marriage for girls of higher castes.

Status of women in the society

From the early period till now Kamarupa is found to enjoy the honour of being an important seat of Sakti worship. The joint worship of Siva and Sakti was also in vogue from very ancient times. The ancient history of Kamarupa as Assam was later called throws light on the different aspects of women in different times. The grant of vanamala gives us a picture about the lowest class of women in the society of ancient Assam. In this temple of Hatakasulin which was reconstructed by Vanamala there lived the Vesyas or public women, king Vanamala is described as a lord of prostitutes⁵ (Parvatia grant, V.10). The institution of prostitution existed in India from very early times. Prostitution was in existence in parts of Assam, as known from epigraphs and literary works. The Bargaon⁶ grant refers to the Vesyas and Varastri, both meaning courtesans and they generally resided in the best streets of the cities. They had to sing and dance for the entertainment of the king and their

³ Cited in the Journal of Assam Research Society, Vol. XXXVII, 2005, Dr. B. Kakati: Concept of Marriage in Hinduism, P.217

⁴ Dr. Godavari D Patil: Hindu Widow, 2002, P73.

⁵ D. Sarma: Kamarupasasanavali, P.117.

⁶ N. D. Choudhary: Historical Archaeology of Central Assam, 1985, P. 146.

guest. They were treated as precious material rather than as human being and they were given rather low social position. The most reference to prostitute is found in the Tezpur, Parbatia and Dighaligaon grants of king Vanamala Varmadeva. Tribal social groups of North East don't have the institution of prostitutes. If ancient Assam is taken to have been a predominantly tribal area, as it must have been, the institution of prostitute couldn't have developed locally. In all probability it was introduced by king of Kamarupa from outside under the influence of high society culture of ancient India⁷. It may be noted in this connection that the rise of private property and gradual establishment of the state certainly lowered the position of women and converted her into a commodity. It is easy to see that all avenues to prostitution didn't offer her same kind of economic security. A raped woman had little chance of an honorable marriage and social rehabilitation, so reduced to prostitution; she had accepted whatever came her way. Another channel of the supply of prostitutes was young virgins given away as gifted on special religious and secular occasions. The number of such girls given away to brahmins guests and priests. Finally, a totally abhorrent manner of procuring women for temple prostitution was buying women and giving them to the temples. Such donors were said to grow rich in this life and live in heaven for a long time. All prostitutes are not belongs to the same categories. The accomplished young beauty could name her price. Speaking of the ranks of royal attendance the Kurudhamma Jataka says that the lowest of the rank of the prostitutes were the door keepers, the dvarika. The epigraph as well as literary works makes references to the institution of natis or dancing girls, which was prevalent in ancient Assam. They were known as devadasis. The duties of dancing girls were to fan the idol with camara to prepare garlands and seeing and dance before the god. The introduction of dancing girls in temples, no doubt tended to affect their morals and spiritual atmosphere. Some people used to visit the shrines not for paying respect to the deities but for enjoying the services of the devadasis. Dancing girls were also employed as spies and the custom was in vogue even during Ahom period.

In the prasastis there are references about the queens, women officers of the royal palace and the wives of the Brahmana donees. The copper plate grants include the name 'rajni' or wives of feudatory chiefs and minor chieftains as sharing right over the land. It appears that queens of those periods had taken the responsibility of the state. In the epigraphs it is clearly stated that the Bahmana women maintain their respect for their respective husbands and also kept their chastity intact⁸. Women's position and status was considerably higher during the early vedic period than the later periods, but it doesn't affect the general status picture, for during no historical period did women enjoy equal position or status with men. In a settled agricultural community, the women gradually lost social mobility and a measure of freedom that she had been enjoying before. She became men's ward, possession, object of enjoyment. Society was now polygamous; polyandry disappeared except in some pockets⁹.

Findings of the studies

In the foregoing discussion it is clear that women played a key role in the society of ancient Assam. Respect for women is enjoined in the Dharmasastra .It has been laid down that where women were honoured there gods were pleased and where there is no respect for women there will be nothing good. Man should always honour women for their own prosperity and interest. The ancient history of Kamarupa or Assam throws light on the different aspect of women. They played a

⁷ Cited in, JARS, Vol. XXXI, 1990, J. P. Singh: Prostitutes in Ancient Assam, P.57.

⁸ D. Sarma: Kamarupasanavali, P. 168.

⁹ S. Bhattacharya: Prostitution in Ancient India, Social scientist, Feb.1987, Vol.15

very important role in the family and society. In the household affair women occupied a place of honour. As a mother she had the right to take important decision. As a house wife her duty was to nurse her husband, take care of her children and serve the guest. We have discussed above about the institution of prostitute in ancient Assam. Where women were venerated and worship at the same time having no means of livelihood women took up this customs. This custom reduces the women's position in society as well as lived in a miserable condition. They have no chance to get an honorable position in the society. The institution of devadasi was borrowed by priest from the king. The virgin dedicated to a novel cause, it is however strange, and living like the Buddhist nun, degenerated into the very social evil like prostitution and they also allowed to defile the temple of god. It affected the society very seriously. The women always remain dependant. Yogini Tantra refers that women were punished if they failed in their duties to their husband. It is known from the evidence that except for few higher caste Hindu widow remarriage is common amongst the other classes of people. Child marriage was also prevalent but there is no evidence of purdah system. Women's property rights were only over stridhana. With regards to the education of women during this period the position of women was not equal with that of men. Education for women was only provided for the Brahmana and women of the royal families. In general music and dance appear as an important education at that time. As mentioned earlier the position of women in different aspect of society was not uniform. The higher class women generally living in better condition but the ordinary women's conditions was nothing good and they lived as usual.

Conclusion

Civilizations come through the combined contribution of both men and women. However until the most recent past historians have depicted about the life and experiences of men only. The experiences of women and their contribution to the society have totally been neglected. Most of the time, the inscription only inform us about the queens and in some cases about the wives of the Brahmanas, the beneficiaries of land grant. Women in general were looked down upon in the society which was male oriented. In the back drop of emerging feudalism, which was gradually making its impact in this region, the deteriorating condition of women was quite natural. A new kind of interpretation of history is required where one can free oneself from the patriarchal mindset, so ingrained in our society and verify the existing sources to construct the history which deals with the life and experiences of human beings to do justice to the writing of history. It should be pointed out that no society can move forward without the active participation of the men and women, so the role of women can never be obliterated from the pages of the history.

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