

## A Portrayal of the Status of Women Through Assamese Proverbs

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### Abstract:

Women- being in the centre place of discussion in social science discourse have always been neglected facing gender discrimination in the society from the ancient period. In spite of the constitutional measures adopted and the affirmative actions taken by the governments of independent India, empowerment of women is strictly restricted to a section in society. Women have been facing numerous social evil practices like child marriage, Sati, polygamy, ban on widow remarriage etc that greatly undermine women position in society. In the patriarchal society, women are subjugated to social norms and practices and hence facing social evils, that needs to be removed. Status of women in Assamese society is represented in different times by the proverbs popular in Assamese literature and language. Proverbs or Fokora Jujona- the short and oral traditional sayings that express bitter truth of society are commonly used by people of a given region over a longer period of time. this article will try to highlight the status of Assamese women through an analytical study of Assamese proverbs.

### Keywords:

Status of women, Assamese, proverb.

### Introduction:

Literature of every community represents insights into the social practices and customs of daily life of its members, which in-turn make the literal components rich and varied. The short-stories, poem, novel and the folklores prevailing in any language are necessary to understand the community from a very deeper point of view. Women, are important point of discussion in literary works in every language. Proverbs which are very important parts of Assamese folklore, are used daily and popular among different sections, carry out a mixed analysis of the status of women in Assamese society. Here, an attempt has been made to analyse the position of Assamese women through an analytical study of Assamese proverbs.

### Objectives:

The objectives of the current study are:

- To study Assamese literature and language from a gender perspective.
- To portray the position of women in Assamese society through an analytical study of proverbs.

## Methods:

The research is explanatory and analytical in method. And for this purpose, secondary sources of data are used. Assamese Novels, books, thesis, journals and internet sources are used in collecting the data.

## Assamese Proverbs and Women:

A gender perspective of Assamese society is expressed through the proverbs used in daily life. As a part of folklore, these proverbs are basically very short sentences used by generations to generations orally and are related to some social issues representing different perspectives or some bitter truth underlying the society. The proverbs occur in society in different periods of time facing different social experiences and thus, it represents a wide range of issues related to society, which are essentials to understand daily life, experience and expectations of the community.

Women are one of the main subjects of Assamese proverbs or fokora-jujonas, where gender perspectives are clearly seen valuating or devaluating women positions in society. Women, the vital part of society, have to play different roles and to contribute in social change and development. Being a mother, wife, sister, daughter-a women is generally expected to play the role of a “care giver” as traditionally, women are considered as kind, lovable and tolerable. This role entrusted in women by the patriarchal society has greatly undervalued their position. They remain confined under the four walls of their home, taking care of the family. In this way, they become victims of gender discrimination and segregated from the participation in social, political and economic life of the country. The position of women in Assamese society is clearly visible through these proverbs. This gender perspective in social traditions in Assam is instrumental to assess multi-faceted role of women perceived through different ages. The literal meaning of Assamese proverb bring out different perspectives on women’s social and physical characteristics and their relations in society.

Some of the Assamese proverbs are directly alluring and enticing to the nature of women. One of such proverbs in Assamese folk traditions is “*Uthon Suwali Borha Bhat, Poka dhaan totyalike kaat*” which means just as the ripe harvest should be cut as soon as possible, girls/women should be married as soon as they grow up. This typical proverb is representative of social views on women, where women are considered merely as a burden upon their family and how this burden should be released as soon as possible by marrying her off to other family. Similarly, another view on women is represented by the proverb “*Dhoimoni tirik naniba ghorok, ghorkhon bhang kore larak kharak*” where marriage of widow women is restricted in society. This proverb means that a widow should not be married and bring home as she destroys home. This kind of mental outlook regarding the widow was prevalent in Assamese society where the rights of widows are restricted and they had to live a very measurable life limiting her movements within the four walls of the house. Their presence in any social auspicious occasion is considered as unfortunate and unfavourable in social minds. “*Masor naniba kuta, tiri naniba bozaar loota*” this Assamese proverb means that those women who go out of the house often are not of good character. They have daily interactions with other men and hence might also harbour relations out of wedlock. In this way, women have to suffer social stigma and are dishonoured. Then, “*Jaar Gharat Matamuwa Tiri, Taar Gharat Nai Chiri*” is a direct attack on the physical appearance of women. This proverb

means that a house with woman with masculine features has no prosperity. Thus, it goes against the accepted social image of a 'woman'.

Again, women's capability and wisdom and their worth are undervalued by the proverb "*Lou Jimanei Dangor Houk, Sadai Paator Talat*". This proverb literally means that a Bootle gourd, irrespective of how much it is grown, it will have to be under the leaves. This indirectly means that the women, how much educated they are or achievements they got and capable of doing things by their own, they have to live under the men. This proverb prevailing in society ranks women inferior to men. Some proverbs are indicative of the idea that women are the homemaker and the men the main bread earner in the society. The duty of women should be limited to home, like taking care of family members (including children and elders), cooking and cleaning of the house etc. They must not go outside in search of jobs or livelihood. Earning livelihood is the responsibility of men. "*Giri Jai Porot, Tiri Thake Ghorot*"- is representative of such kind of mental possession against women section in society.

A serious reproach or disgrace to women position in society is clearly visible through the proverb "*Kotaari dhoraabaa xile, Tirotaa baabaa kile*" meaning men should sharpen their knives on stone and manage their wives with blows or smacking. It not only permits physical violence against women, but also violates laws prevailing for them. There are many proverbs that stress on controlling women by force or by beating them every now and then. This patriarchal misconception is reflected in "*Maheke Pasheke Diba Tao, Tehe Dekhiba Tirir Bhao*" -where men are suggested to maintain their masculinity by beating their wives in a week or fortnight. Again, "*Daot Khan, Kutharot Xil, Maheke Pasheke Tirik Kil*" belongs to the same genre of thought. Some of the prevailing Assamese proverbs directly comments on the mysterious nature of women. "*Tiri Lota Tiri pota; Tirik nokobi hosa kotha*" -this proverb refers to women and their talkative nature. This implies women love to gossip; they let out a lot of secrets that lead to conflicts at home or elsewhere. Another proverb where women are considered as deceptive is "*Naari solonamui, nari'r soritro bikhoye debotae najane*" suggesting that even the gods are unaware of their personality. These proverbs are unethical and immoral as they consider women as mysterious, untrustworthy and unreliable in society. "*Tiri, Miri, Bhatou, Kowa, Ei Charis Asuai Nopowa*"- this proverb compares four living beings i.e. Tiri (women), Miri (an ethnic Community of Assam), Bhatou (Parrots) sand Kowa (Crows) and suggested that all these four are equally unreliable and unpredictable.

Sometimes, proverbs targets women and judge them on their virginity. Women, in society, are considered as pure and eligible to marry if they are virgin. "*Kakil Xundar Hoi Suwadi Maatot, Ramani Xundar Hoi Satitwar Gunot*" – this proverb is suggestive of the social conception that women are considered as beautiful if they are virgin just like the Koels are considered beautiful because of their musical voice. This kind of comparison and the conception of measuring women purity based on their virginity is highly disrespectful.

Assamese proverbs, though they are mainly concentrating on the patriarchal nature of society and suggest how women should be dealt with by male in society, there are also available proverbs that have a positive bearing on the nature of women. A mere positive attribute can be seen in these proverbs that glorify women existence

and apply importance to women in the day-to-day family life. They not only suggest how important role they play in the life of men, but recommend highly on maintaining cordial relation between men and women. One of such proverbs is “*Ghoiniye Ghor, Ghoini Nohole Ghorei Alar Athar*”, which means that wife is herself is home, without her, the home loses its base or the foundation. In this proverb, the women are given importance in maintaining the home. Similarly, “*Tiriye Gir, Tiri Nohole Jai Hatachiri*” provides high respect towards women as it considers women as the centre of home, as it is the women who make the home a heaven.

Some proverbs also place high importance on women as they consider women as one of the key parts of decision-making in the family. This type of illustration can be seen in “*Gharar Ghoini. Chalir Maak, tok Nuxudhi Hudhim Kaak*” where the women, the wife and the mother of the children is given importance in taking any decision for the family. This shows that women in traditional Assamese society play important role in taking decision for the family, as the husband and wife jointly take decision that ensures progress and prosperity of the Family.

Thus, an analysis of the Assamese proverbs from gender perspective is instrumental to understand how women enjoy their status in traditional Assamese society.

### Conclusion:

Assamese society, basically being a traditional patriarchal society, dominated by male section and the social uses of proverbs in day-to-day life, characterises gender conceptualization. This trend continued and consequently, women have become the main discussed topic of proverbs. The prevailing social circumstances for women, like lack of education and restriction from different social activities have made the life of women measurable. The women were not in a position to raise their voice against the sexist elements of these proverbs. However, these proverbs have mixed type of conceptions regarding women- some are very disrespectful towards women and some others glorify women in society. With the changes of time and awakening of women towards their rights, society has changed and made progress, where women are now considered as equal to men and are taking equal participation in social, political and economic life. Many proverbs also lost its existence from society with the social advancement. Thus, a gender perspective hidden in Assamese Folk Culture through the study of proverbs is necessary to understand the status of women during the ancient Assamese society.

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