**Women, Society and Patriarchy in 19th Century Assam**

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**ABSTRACT**: In every society women constitute almost half of its population. Women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization. Despite their indispensable contribution they were marginalized and dominated throughout the ages by the men in the patriarchal societies. In the same way, the contribution of the Assamese women to the formation of its society was not less significant than the women of other societies. Their contribution to the history making process is also important since immemorial past. In spite of their vital contribution, the women in the Assamese Hindu families in the 19th century Assam were marginalized in the society which came under the patriarchal control long before that period. The 19th century was also the transitional period as consequence of the introduction of the British colonial rule and various social reform movements, which touched the women affairs too. In this context, an attempt is made in this paper to study about the position occupied by the Assamese women in the society in the 19th century Assam and also about their changing status as result of this social transition.

**Keywords**: Assamese Women, Assamese Society, Patriarchy, Colonial Assam, 19th century Assam.

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**I. Introduction:**

Assam is a small state situated in the north-eastern part of India. Till the beginning of the 19th century it was ruled by the kings of the Ahom dynasty. Internal dissentions and external invasions like the Moamoria rebellion, the Burmese invasion and the British imperialism ultimately led to the end of the Ahom rule resulting British annexation of the state in 1826. Therefore, the history of the early part of the 19th century Assam is significant from political as well socio-cultural perspective. Socio-culturally, the difficulties faced by the Assamese women were very serious at this critical juncture. This is because of the fact that the real contest between patriarchy and the liberal ideas took place, developed and attained the apex during this period. This clash continued upto the
end of the 19th century resulting the social transition, the impact of which was very distinct upon Assamese women.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The main objective of this research is to study about the Assamese women in different fields such as family, society, economy, politics, administration, etc., in the early colonial period, particularly up to the end of the 19th century. Attempt has been made here to explore how the socio-religious mores prevalent in our patriarchal society were working as impediments towards women progress and how women were exploited in the family and the society. This research paper mainly deals with the women belong to Hindu population of the Brahmaputra valley.

III. Methodology:

The methodology followed in this study is historical and analytical. Attempt has been also made to make the work objective so far as possible. Primary sources used here are contemporary literature, public and private records, biographical works and autobiographies, personal letters and diaries, newspapers, journals, periodicals and writings of both male and female writers, etc. Secondary sources such as published books, journals and periodicals, newspapers, etc., are used in the preparation of this work.

IV. Result and Discussion:

First of all, it is important to understand the socio-religious condition of the Brahmaputra Valley to know the status of the Assamese women in the 19th century. And to understand the socio-religious condition, we cannot ignore the socio-religious traditions that we borrowed from the pre-British Assamese society. Settled agriculture, the spread of Brahmanical culture in ancient Assam, the process of Hinduisation during the Ahom reign, the emergence of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and some other circumstances led to the development of a patriarchal society in Assam. In the early part of the 19th century religious domination and subordination of Assamese Hindu women were very strong and distinct. People supported the prevalence of many religious traditions which degraded the status of women. Development of hierarchical stratified social structure, aspects of food and sex, insistence on to stop the worship of female
deities and many other notions of patriarchy in the religious idioms of the people were maintained.[1] The Hindu notion of purity and pollution was also deep rooted in matter relating to food, childbirth and death. Women lost their economic power as Vaishnavism did not allow them to keep lives stocks like pig and fowl which formed sources of their economic strength in the contemporary agrarian society of Assam. Thus, women in Assam gradually came under the patriarchal control.[2] This decline in their status was further progressed in the 19th century when most backward communities and castes began to imitate the high caste rules in order to obtain a higher social status.

Women’s involvement in production system during the medieval period gradually disappeared in the early 19th century when the Brahmanical systems backed by the Raghunandan Code of Bengal treated it as low and undignified. This was further supported by eminent Assamese like Haliram Dhekial Phukan. Gradually, the profession of the pohari, spinning and weaving and other manual works done by women outside the house began to be treated as low profession. Thus, a woman who was an indispensable part of the economy of a family became degraded for her own craft in the conservative Brahmanical outlook. [3]

The concept of chastity and sexuality and men-women relationship also became rigid. The system of keeping the son-in-law in the father-in-law’s house (ghar jowain) and that of taking the bride-price (gadhan), which were largely popular in Ahom period became unpopular in the 19th century. Dissolution of marriage was also permissible on the initiative of either of the women or the men without any difference in social legitimacy. Even children born outside the wedlock were not unacceptable to the society. Widow re-marriage became prohibited.[4] The new code of social conduct gradually spread over among the other people of the society.

From what has been discussed above, it has become clear that depriving of women of their economic power and implementation of brahmanical religious and social codes in the society facilitated the process of patriarchal domination in Assam. But this remained mainly confined to the highly brahmanized section of the society which formed the privileged class in the state till at least the early 19th
century. But this created a strong trend in the process of subordination of women to men irrespective of caste which got its full form in early 20th century.

During the transitional period up to the beginning of the twentieth century, the position of women deteriorated with the advent of the foreigners. The Burmese invasion during the first quarter of the 19th century, for example, came down as a curse on the Assamese women. It curtailed their freedom and in such a state of insecurity, the Assamese Hindus preferred to give their daughters in marriage at an early age and at times to married persons of the same community to protect their daughters from being carried away by the invaders. But with the passage of time, these measures turned into social customs like early marriage and polygamy. Thus, the women became the most suppressed, exhausted and subservient section of the society in the subsequent period.[5]

The status women in 19th century Assam can be well understood by the long ranging debate on the introduction of women education. Initially social reformers, revivalist as well as liberals perceived education of women as an instrument of changing their subordinate status in the society. Often this led to considerable debates among the social reformers and the conservatives (traditionalist). The occupation of the state by the British in the year 1826 opened way for the American Baptist Missionaries to visit this part of the country for proselytization. In Assam the first schemes for female education were started by them. Before 1826, formal education was restricted to men. The wives of the American Baptist Missionary began to set up schools for both boys and girls. The missionary woman cites as the main barrier to women’s education the women’s owns belief impressed on them from birth, in their ignorance and inability to learn and ridicule they faced if ever tried to do so. There were some other barriers like, child marriage, female seclusion, suspicion of the motives of the white skinned-foreigners, superstition among the Hindus that if a girl was educated she would become a widow, etc. Unable to make an advance in this respect the missionaries evolved a strategy of establishing girls’ boarding school where they gathered orphaned and destitute or abandoned girls whom they educated. Thus the Nagaon Orphan Institution was founded in the year 1843 by Bronson.[6] The American Christian missionaries had also published the first ever Assamese monthly journal –the Orunodoi from Sibsagar in the year 1846. It helped to
create a public opinion on the current social issues like women education, child marriage, polygamy and widow remarriage etc. This journal played a leading role in publishing articles on women issues written by contemporary Assamese elites.

English education was developing in the state after the establishment of the government English school in 1835. Although no definite information in this regard has come to light, Gunabhiram Baruah (1838 -1894), one of the leading elites of 19th century Assam, has stated that Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1828 -1859), son of Haliram Dhekial Phukan, the writer of the first modern history of the state, showed great respect towards women education and taught his wife Mahindri Devi at home by himself and formally started his daughter Padmawati’s education (vidyarmabha) at the age of five.[7] According to Gunabhiram, Phukan’s view was that , “Women and men are both part of humanity. Therefore, if women remain uneducated, one side of the man remains as if sick.”[8] Phukan also stood for freedom of women if they were properly educated. In fact, he considered education as key for women emancipation. Gunabhiram, however, did not mention as to what exactly the idea of that modern Assamese was about women’s freedom. However, Anandaram’s role to educate his wife and daughter forms a significant stage in this regard.

The clearest and most forceful arguments put forward for the cause of women’s education was by Gunabhiram Barua. He told that the prime duty of the parents to educate both sons and daughters and maintain them equally. He even argued against polygamy and advocated for widow remarriage. One of the luminaries of the time Hem Chandra Barua (1835 -1896), advocated for equality of men and women. Hem Chandra Barua also supported widow remarriage.[9]

In the 19th century Assam, only three first generation women writers- Padmawati Devi Phukanani, Bishnupriya Devi and Swarnalata Devi, advocated for women’s right in the 19th century. Padmawati Devi emphasized on the equality of men and women. She had made an appeal to her sisters to have education. For, according to her, it is education that will make them happy in both this and the other world.[10] In the same way, Bishnupriya Devi wrote in her essay on the duties of wife and the husband where she said that giving education to girls is more necessary than to the boys as girls are given away to
the houses of others, and they will have to take some serious responsibility in a house where she was not born and brought up.[11] Thus, both Bishnupriya and Padmawati considered the management of the domestic sphere as the primary aim of women’s education.

Debate on women education was initiated in journals like Assam Bandhu. Most of the articles published in this journal on women’s issues attacked women education from the conservative point of view. While the editor allowed the opponents of women education to openly express their views he made his own stand clear in an editorial comment at the end of the articles and stated that it is not easy to rebuild barriers once broken and that reason and justice will prevail.[12]

Despite the efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries and a small group of first generation western educated gentry to promote women’s education in Assam, the attitudes of the people were indifferent towards it till the end of the 19th century.[13] The situation has changed after the publication of the Hunter Commission Report on education in 1883, which strongly recommended the government to take up steps in this regard. As a result the progress from primary to secondary education for girls began in 1884 when a government M.E. school was opened in Shillong and in the next year a girls’ M.V. school at Dibrugarh.[14] The news of opening girls’ school and government and citizen’s pressure on local boards to start girls’ schools led a change in public views on women education. As a result a continuous debate had been taking place in the pages of Assam Bandhu (1885-1886), Mau (1886-87) and Jonaki (1889-1916) on this issue.

Opposition to the women’s education was voiced by a number of elites. Ratneswar Mahanta, an educated Assamese of that time, argued on the duties of the wives and women education.[15] He advocated women education only to cultivate the virtues and duties of an ideal Hindu wife. He praises the rural daughters-in-law who are always afraid of their in-laws as well as husbands who voluntarily imprisoned herself in the household chores. While Mahanta had been writing the series of article opposing women’s education, Swarnalata Devi
opposed him advocating the liberation of women from unjust and irrational social constraints like *pardah*.[16]

Purnakanta Sarma, another conservative and member of the elite, held that there is no need of women education. He opined that this happy world would turn poisonous once women got education.[17] According to him the inequality of sexes, women being left or weaker side (*bamangana*), was not only enjoined in all scriptures but could be confirmed by observation of lower creatures. Above all he apprehended that as there were a very few or no printed books in Assamese, the new literate girls would go to read light.[18] Another stalwart of this school of opponents Lambodar Bora also viewed that education for women will merely result in the rejection of bridegroom on their part, and will encourage them to write love letters.[19]

In *Mou*, Balinarayan Borah, the first Assamese Engineer, has explicitly argued that home is the place of learning for girls. According to him it is not a bad idea to educate women but it is not desirable that this education should be like that of the men opting for degree of B.A. M.A. or o become doctors or lawyers.[20] He believed that if the girls go to schools or colleges, that would affect their bodies adversely and affecting their bodies will affect the generation that they will produce, similarly, a woman doctor will have to touch the body of a person other than the husband’s and a lawyer will have to do business of a man.[21] Panindra Nath Gogoi held the view that the system of education which teaches women to become an ideal housewife should only be supported. Education for obtaining University degree like M.A., B.A. etc. and the education that encourages women to behave like men is not at all desirable.[22]

In fact, male objections to female education seem to have been based on a fear of the unknown powers education could give a woman.[23] In addition literacy was suspected of diverting women’s attention from their domestic duties. There was argument that education was necessary for the creation of an enlightened mother, and thence of an enlightened race continued to be advanced throughout the country. Women were also responsible for the mental outlook of their children. Women were to be educated primarily for their role in grooming men; their own edification was always secondary. For them female education
should be approved only in order to create an ideal class of wives, caring, intelligent and capable or maintaining the family. Thus they did not argue for a class of women equal in all respects with men. Thus, they were simply afraid of a class of women who could be equal to men and who could therefore destabilize the existing patriarchal social setup.[24]

The debate involving various arguments had positive impacts on society’s outlook on women education as late as the second half of the 19th century. As a result we find girls from Assam going to Calcutta for collegiate education by the beginning of the 20th century. Thus although not all supported education for women, and even those who advocated for it within certain limits, this 19th century background had formed the basis of the 20th century development in the state in so far as the movement for women emancipation was concerned.

The traditional Hindu ideal of marriage, expressed in the Hindu scriptures and in the epics and *puranas*, continued even throughout the 19th century Assam. In traditional society, marriage was not viewed as a union between two compatible individuals, but as a social alliance between families. A bride became a part of her husband’s family on marriage, and brought a substantial dowry with her. Marriage were arranged by the family elders with a view to maintaining or enhancing the power and prestige of the family.[25]

To the Hindus, marriage was obligatory religious ceremonies, which each man ought to perform in order to beget his son who might perform his funeral ceremonies and rescue his soul from hell. If the first marriage proved barren, a second wife should be taken into order that the necessary offspring may be obtained. In other cases there was religious injunction regarding a second marriage, but there was no prohibition against it. A Hindu, therefore, might have as many wives as he pleased, but in practice he seldom took more than one. One, however, he was bound to have. It was equally incumbent on a Hindu parent to see that his daughters were duly married, so that almost all Hindus, males as well as females, were married at some period or other of their lives.[26]

Repression was the rule of behavior towards women according to Hindu law. From childhood to old age the Hindu women looked to someone else for her authority and guidance. Women must be kept quiet. They might speak to the men
servants when necessary, but a well-bred woman was shy even with her brothers. She could not eat with her husband. If a third person entered the room she had to withdraw unless he gave her permission to stay. If the newcomer was a man, she quickly veiled herself and left. She never addressed her husband in the presence of his mother. She never spoke of him directly; if there was occasion to refer to him she spoke of him as the father of her eldest child. She never sat in the presence of her mother-in-law. She never went shopping. Well-bred women were never seen in the bazaar. Either merchants were asked to send their wares to her house for her inspection, or one of the men of her household undertook to choose what she desired, be it personal clothing, jewels, or something for the house. Thus family influence was tremendous. Any decision affecting a women or girl was subjected for approval to a conclave of the entire relationship. Loyalty between the various members of the family was intense. The earnings and resources were pooled and the head of the house took the responsibility of providing the necessaries from the common fund. Moreover, the wife had never any recognized authority, even over her children. One could understand, then, how those who had so little acquaintance with the idea of self determination found it easy to decide that to follow custom was the only safe path.[27]

In the Brahmaputra valley child marriage or early marriage was uncommon, except possibly amongst a few of the higher castes. Among the lower castes, which consisted largely of converts from the tribes, it was more usual than not for a girl to attain puberty while still unmarried, and her age at marriage dealt upon her personal qualifications, the position of her parents, and the value they set upon her. Out of 1000 girls less than 4 years of age only 10 were married; 308 were married out of the same number aged 5-9. It was probable that the great majority of those returned as married at the last mentioned age period were over 12 years of age. In the case of a girl who had not attained the puberty two ceremonies were performed. The first is really more a betrothal than a marriage, after it had been concluded the girl returned to her father’s house, where she resided till the menstrual period, when a second ceremony was performed, on the conclusion of which she was taken to her husband’s house and cohabited with him.[28]
The number of girl child that became the victim of child or early marriage in the first part of the 20th century is as the follow as-

Table No.1: Rate of Early Marriages among the Assamese Girl Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Below 5 Years (per 1000)</th>
<th>5—10 Years (per 1000)</th>
<th>10—15 Years (per 1000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


However, there was an increasing tendency to push back the age in the later days. If marriage took place before puberty, the child wife remained in her mother’s home for a year or two and was instructed in the art of the home. Child marriage, even at 15, was cruel enough, robbing the girl women of her opportunities for education, and often of her health, making her responsible for human life and destinies. One could see the necessity of the surveillance of older women, and it was her husband’s mother who received the prerogative. But when her children were born, if at all possible, she returned to her own mother for a time. The sons brought home their wives to the ancestral roofs where they had to live under the domination of their mother-in-law. The Indian bride did not know the joy of keeping house ‘just for two’ but became a part, and for long time the least part of the husband’s family.[29]

The following table containing the names of a few prominent Assamese women will give an idea regarding the child marriage or early marriage in Assam during the 19th and 20th century.
Table No.2: List of prominent Assamese Women and their age of Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of Marriage</th>
<th>Age of Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Padmawati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927)</td>
<td>1862</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swarnalata Baruah (1879-1832)</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>8 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troilokeswari Devi Baruani (1875-1954)</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>13 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamalalaya Kakati (1894-1946)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>14 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandrawati Devi Katakai (1897-1974)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nalinibala Devi (1898-1977)</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemalata Baruah (1908-1982)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>14 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratibha Devi (1911-1932)</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>13 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The issue of child marriage became an important topic which was coming to the forefront of discussion in the All India Women’s Movement.[30]

Like child marriage, polygamy also became a serious matter to be concerned in Assam during the 19th and 20th century. In the Brahmaputra Valley, it was a socially sanctioned custom in the Hindu society. If the first wife failed to give birth of a male child, a second wife should be taken into order that the necessary offspring may be obtained. In other cases there was religious injunction regarding a second marriage, but there was no prohibition against it. A Hindu, therefore, had as many wives as he pleased, but in practice he seldom took more than one. One, however, he was bound to have. Co-wives seldom lived together.[31]

The system of dowry is another social evil among the Hindus of Assam, which existed even during the colonial period. Though the custom of dowry was not a common problem in the Brahmaputra Valley, it had another bad side effect of the marriage norms. The parents of girls were spending thousands in the form of dowry to buy B.A. and M.A. husbands for them. However, it was the custom for upper-caste parents of guardians of pre-puberty brides to finance their husband’s higher studies in Calcutta or elsewhere as attested in the autobiography of many well-known personalities. The disparity of age and education among
man and wife led to future unhappiness. The practice drew the attention of the Mahila Samiti to remove such practices.[32]

The most suffered section of the women in Assamese society in the Brahmaputra Valley during the colonial period was the widows. They were called Bidhava in Assamese and hatred by all. A widow was held responsible for the death of her husband and she was socially boycotted, and was not allowed to go to any social or religious functions. She had to live a very poor life, had to dress in white specified by her society.

In the Brahmaputra Valley, widow remarriage was prohibited by the Brahmanas, Ganaks, Kayasthas and caste Hindus. It was however, dying out among the Kalitas, and was regarded by all classes of Hindus as not altogether proper. It was resorted to mainly by the poor people; but even with them a remarried widow was not received with much respect. A distinction was, however, drawn between virgin widows and widows whose previous marriage was consummated. The odium which attaches to the alter did not exist in the case of the virgin widow, as local custom allows the supplementary marriage ceremony, Santibiya, which proceeded consummation, to be performed by the second man if the person who went through the first ceremony was dead. In this case, therefore, there was a regular religious ceremony, instead of simply feast and public acknowledgement, which was all that usually accompanied the second union of an ordinary widow. But in both cases alike the marriage was looked upon as binding, and the children could inherit.[33]

The deteriorated condition of the Assamese widows draws the attention of Gunabhiram Baruah. He saw women education as means for making women accomplished housewives but as contributing to their intellectual development. He had absorbed his advanced views through his education in Calcutta and particularly through contact with progressive Brahmo views on widow remarriage and female education. Gunabhiram, while going to Bengal for higher education, was influence by personalities like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of the prominent social reformers of Bengal, who fought for the improvement of the conditions of Hindu widows and for whom widow remarriage came into practice in India. After that Gunabhiram started his reform activities so that widow remarriage could be put into practice in Assam. He wrote a social drama named
Ram Nabami based on the condition Assamese widows and urged the people to be liberal to those fellow women and take steps for the redressal of their grievances. To prove his consistency in support of widow remarriage he also married himself Bishnupriya Devi, the widow of late Parashuram Baruah and daughter of Labodar Kataki. This act of Gunabhiram shocked the contemporary Assamese women and it remained an instance for the improvement of the condition of the Assamese widows from that time.[34]

Conjugality is an important social relationship which can determine the status of women in the society. Following the introduction of western education there was drastic change of the traditional conjugal relationship in the Assamese society. Some women began to accept the western views of love and conjugality, not only confined them as wife within the four walls of their houses. Some young educated Assamese males also extended their helping hands for the cause of the Assamese women, while another section hold their conservative ideas and tried to dominate the female section of the society. Lambodar Bora, an Assamese writer, under the pseudonym Sadananda Baboo, wrote in newspaper. He was more concerned about the spread of western mode of thinking and acting and its consequences on the female moral character. He, writing under the pseudonym Sadananda Baboo in his satirical dictionary defines “Stri-Swadhinata” (women’s independence) as “a women abandoning her husband and children, refusing a husband, going alone to take to the air in public gardens, meeting educated friends (males), running a household without males, chasing away mother-in-law and father-in-law from the house or refusing them food, ‘making husbands perform cooking and other household chores, release of women from all bindings (mukali kora) or allowing them to ride to their males (as mauts ride) elephants, ascending elephants by putting feet on the backs of men”. [35]

During the colonial period, the change in the conjugal relationship was also brought about by the British legislation, which was seen by a section of the Assamese society as a weakening the hold of custom and Hindu law. Gunabhiram Baruah and Pandita Ramabai had been married under the Special Marriage Act of 1871, his as a Brahmo and hers as an inter-caste one. It is therefore interesting to see that among the evil acts attributed to educated girls in
the Assam Bandhu articles was their refusing to accept husbands chosen by their fathers or leaving husbands and kids.[36]

The difference of gender perspective was seen in male and female assessment of literary influence on female behavior. Books like ‘Rukmini-Haran’ and ‘Subhadra-Haran’ were considered as having a dangerous influence by showing women as headstrong, eloping with self-chosen husbands. On the other hand Padmawati Phukanani who in her article “Narir Muktabastha” (women’s free state) in the Assam Bandhu extols the varied skills of ancient Aryan women which justified their freedom, mentioning among them the painter Chitralekha who was instrumental in helping her mistress Usha elope with Aniruddha, Krishna’s grandson. Later in life Phukanani wrote a long essay on “Rukmini Bibah” (Rukmini’s Marriage) where she praises the courage and determination of Rukmini in her devotion to her self-chosen mate, despite paternal opposition.[37]

Conjugality was also changed with the emergence of divorce system during the British colonial period. The divorced had not been returned separately, but were included among the widowed. However, there is a doubt to say to what extent the practice was successful in Assam. According to the Hindu religion marriage was a religious sacrament, which once performed could never be undone. Divorce was, therefore, not recognized, but was nevertheless by no means rare amongst the caste Hindus.[38]

There was no any active political participation of Assamese women in the 19th century. Even during the Mutiny of 1828 by the Ahom nobles and the Revolt of 1857, there is no record of major role played by Assamese women. The participation of the women in the early 19th century state polity was restricted only to the female members of the royal or noble families, mostly in connection with issues like claims for the throne for near relatives or attempt to install a prince on it. Even in the period before 1915 there was no organized movement for women’s participation in social and political affairs. Common womenfolk were not allowed to join in political affairs and their duties were fixed in the domestic world. Thus politically their status was at low ebb. Even the Assam Association as a socio-political organization of that period could not enlist the women to play any direct role in it. However, the foundation of the Dibrugarh
Mahila Samiti in 1915 marked the beginning of women’s organization in the Brahmaputra valley.[39]

V. Conclusion:

In the conclusion it can be summarised that by the beginning of the 19th century the Assamese women completely came under the patriarchal control and therefore their actual status in the society was not good. However, the medieval Assamese society underwent a transformation from the time of the British occupation of Assam in 1826. The introduction of British rule had remarkable impact on the society, polity, economy and culture of the state. The most significant change could be witnessed in the social sphere, which also brought the gradual change in the position of the women, specially towards the end of the 19th century. However, the position of women in Assam was better than that of their counterparts in the rest of India. Most importantly, in some traditions women were not equal to men, but had a higher status than in any other states of India. The introduction of the British rule offered them the scope to free themselves from the patriarchal domination which they had been suffering through some social customs like dowry, inheritance, conjugality, education, widowhood, marriage, etc. Since then the Assamese women no longer preferred to remain secluded in their household duties and came out to the street breaking the four walls of their houses to fight the alien rule as well as to create an identity of their own. The opportunity to participate in the freedom movement along with exposure to the enlightened ideas brought in by the British, inspired a handful of Assamese women to establish an all-Assam women’s organization- Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti in the third decade of the twentieth century. Since that time the women’s movement in Assam gradually became stronger with large scale participation of women. The educated women could realize it very well that the fight for women’s emancipation from the patriarchal domination in the society would remain unsuccessful until the overthrow of the patriarchal rule of the British. So, the movement of the Assamese women for establishing an identity of their own merged with the freedom movement during the early part of the twentieth century. In the post independent period their demands also included a wider place in politics, society, economic activities and so on.
References:


[18] Assam Bandhu, op.cit, p.481.


