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LANGUAGE AND GENDER: INTERACTION AND CONTESTATION

Barasa Deka

Abstract

The identity of a community and its members are intimately related to the cultural attributes, which is exhibited to present their distinctive character and difference with other such communities. Language as an identity marker is considered to be crucial as it is attached to the preservation and recognition of distinctiveness. In a multicultural and multilingual context the identity concerns are very sharp and at times give rise to conflicting claims. The linguistic assertion of communities is attached with political implication and may invoke the issue of domination. However, language not only plays an important role in identity construction of a community in the larger societal structure, but it also produces specific identity construction with the community. Keeping in mind this particular concern, this paper attempts to explore the construction of gender identity through language in the particular context of the study. It seeks to understand how language, through the literary expression of a period reinforces existing gender relation and role. At the same time it also explores how through the same medium of expression such constructions have been questioned. The paper presents its analysis in two historical phases, in the context of Assam, to understand the interaction and contestations of language and gender.

Key words: Assam, Gender, Identity, Language

Introduction

The idea of a nation as a community or group of people is characterized by certain commonalities predominantly in terms of cultural attributes. When such communities are attached with the natural aspiration to turn into a Nation-State, they invariably look for consolidation of such common attributes. However, aspiration for consolidation of commonalities such as common language in a multilingual context is fraught with various implications. As the Nation-State is far from being a homogenous entity, an inherent conflict between the tendency of homogeneity and existing diversities emerges within it. The visualization of a Nation-State alongside a common identity, which is largely western centric, may not necessarily reflect the trajectory of Nation-State and nation-building process in other parts of the world such as emergence of India as a Nation-state. The understanding of the Nation-State on the conditions for the establishment of a common language as the national language may restrict the reflection of the aspirations of the heterogeneous composition of it.

In a multicultural context represented by diverse communities, language becomes a crucial marker of cultural identity of a community and its members. Therefore, linguistic identities express very strong stake to be represented and recognized in the concept of national identity. Language is very intimately attached to the rise of modern nationalism wherein the creation of political boundaries also meant the allocation of a particular status to a language. In India, the post-independence reality in terms of the linguistic reorganization of states clearly indicates the essentiality and inescapability of linguistic identity of various communities. Therefore, while invoking the issue of language in India; one needs to be aware of the sensitivity of its multilingual and multicultural context of application.

In the anthropological sense, language is a part of culture, because it too is a historically derived system of conscious and sub conscious patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society (Friedrich, 1960, p.544). The

embeddedness of both individual and communities in the linguistic identity plays very significant role in the processes by which they define themselves and are defined by others. The crucial political implication of language as a marker of identity is dominantly reflected in the upsurge of identity politics which is intimately related with the demand of rightful recognition and status of a particular language. Such identity politics is more rigorously expressed in a diverse and multilingual context where certain groups live under increasing fear of loss of identity and assert it in order to maintain their distinctiveness and language comes to pay central role in such assertion. Therefore, the interaction between language, political power and identity becomes very intriguing in the context of India.

Understanding the role of a language in such a context, leads one to comprehend that the construction and preservation of identity of a community and its members are intimately related with the preservation of a language. This also determines the choices, opportunities, advantages and lack of them for the communities and its members in the larger social set up. Notwithstanding the role of language in this manner, this paper tries to understand language as a tool of identity creation within a community by reflecting on gender relations and gender equality. The attempt is largely to understand how language, especially the literature of a time continues to represent men and women in a socially and culturally constructed identity and how defiance of such identity takes place within the same mode of expression. The context of the paper is a region representing immense diversity that is the Northeastern region of India and within it more specifically the state of Assam.

When language is considered to be one of the most important markers of identity of a community, the construction of gender identity through language is also very significant to interrogate. The specific objective of the paper is to understand how language has contributed in continuing the preexisting inequalities between sexes. It also seeks to investigate how language through the medium of literary works reiterates the gender role and division of labor corresponding to the

existing patriarchy. However, the paper does not limit itself to the study of only one stream of writings, which reinforces existing gender inequalities, but it largely aims at looking into the other stream of writings where the socially and culturally constructed gender roles have been questioned. This paper purposively focuses on a set of writings by women writers on gender issues in the context of Assam. However, the period which the paper concerns itself also witnessed reflection of women's issues through male writers. Therefore, such references were also brought in to substantiate the arguments. The paper has been largely divided into pre-independence and post-independence period, in terms of historical phases, depending on the historical events of the time and production of the literary works. The paper does not only concern itself with the literary works of these two phases but also with the historical events considered to be defining moments for women's life in Assam. In the first phase the references would be drawn from the 1920s onwards. The rationale for the considering this period is conditioned primarily by two reasons. Firstly, there was increasing fervor of the anti-colonial movement in Assam and secondly there was a significant step towards organizing women in terms of a women's organization to raise women's issues.

The 1920s-30s is considered significant because of the way women's issues encircled in the public sphere. Assam's participation in the Nationalist Movement took defining shift in this era and it was also marked by the establishment of the first All Assam Women's organization known as Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926. The corresponding literary development was the publication of the first women's magazine in Assam 'Ghar-Jeuti'. These two events brought about new understanding of how gender issues unfold in the context of the region and specifically of Assam. The understanding of women's issues through the efforts of the organization and the literary works, specifically the articles in 'Ghar-Jeuti', widened the scope for analyzing the interaction and confrontation of the above mentioned two streams. In the post-independence period the attempt is to understand the events and writings from the period of 1960s to the 1980s. The period is marked by the rise of various identity movements and also publication of

another significant women's magazine 'Aideor Jonaki Baat' later renamed as 'Jonaki Baat'. This paper follows a historical methodology focusing of the events and writings of certain historical moments through which construction of women's identity has been analyzed.

Construction of Gender Identity through Language: The Contextual Analysis

Northeastern region of India presents a picture of plurality, diversity and immense complexity. Therefore, it is essentially important to understand the unfolding of the gender relations within the region to comprehend the literary expression of it. Women of the region cannot be considered as a homogenous category and any conformity with this line of argument may contribute to the loss of objectivity in the process of understanding gender reality of the context. The understanding of gender relations in the region presents two very important and often contradictory points of reference. The first position is drawn from the prevalent belief that gender relation in the region is considered to be based on more egalitarian values than the rest of India. Women's visibility in the public sphere in the forms of active participation in economic activities, the absence of traditional forms of control on women are seen as the marker of gender equality and hence absence of patriarchy. The other position critically challenges this myth of gender equality in the region. The ethnographic and administrative view of gender equality in societies does not seem to look into the functioning of the societies within. "Administrator like Dalton and Robinson have recorded the 'freedom' of the local women, not only among the hill tribes, but also among the plains people, in both social and family matters and the absence of familiar Indian customs like purdah or female seclusion" (Mahanta, 2008, p.243).

However, the deep rooted patriarchy within these societies becomes visible through understanding of the internal functioning of these societies. This has given rise to the need of interrogating the myth and reality of gender equality in the region. The diverse and heterogeneous nature of the societies has much bearing

on the understanding or location of women within the same. Therefore, when one engages oneself in understanding women in Northeastern region, the need is to visualize them through their societies, both tribal and non-tribal. While trying to understand the status of women in the region, these peculiarities have been largely ignored, and therefore, contributed towards creating a myth of gender equality. In an attempt to emphasize, how the women of this region, enjoy high status and equality, different from other societies, there is a tendency to avoid the dynamics within societies in order to understand them. In fact, very few studies have been conducted to understand tribal women within the norms of their own society. Writing about the Nagas, Verrier Elwin, remarks, 'tribal women is in herself exactly the same as any other women, with same position, love, fears, the same devotion to the home, to the husband and children, the same faults and same virtues' (Elwin cited in Zehol, 1998, p.1).

Although there have been multiple interpretations of the way women is understood, coming to the context of Assam, it can be argued that more or less communities are based on patriarchal practices. Certain religious traditions developed in the region have also been considered as contributing to the making of such practices even stronger. "Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankardeva believed in the servant-master component which in a way was applied to various relations between king and the subjects, guru and the disciple, God and devotee and husband and wife. Thus, it was based on a model of submission/ domination to a superior authority" (Mahanta, 2008, p. 349).

The construction of gender identity through language and depiction of the status of women and defiance of such construction can be seen through the portrayal of women of Assam in various literatures representing not only their agency but also their victimhood under the prevailing social customs and tradition. During the colonial period, the portrayal of women can be witnessed in a number of literary works in multiple ways. The writings of litterateur such as Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Dandinath Kaita not only depicted

women as the protagonists but also reflected their status in the family and society in Assam. In his famous story “Bhodori” Bezbaruah tried to depict the rural women of Assam as symbol of tolerance and devotion. On the other hand, in another writing titled “Rudai”, it is reflected that women despite being tolerant and devoted towards husband, sometimes are compelled by the circumstances to get her husband physically assaulted by the villagers to make him reform his character” (Deka Hazarika in Baruah 1992, p. 64-66). Jyotiprasad Agrawala’s dramas reflected the strong women characters such as Queen Mother on the one hand and also women such as Sewali and Kanchan Kunwari who represent the victimhood of women due to rigid rule and customs of the society on the other (Agarwala, cited in 2017,p.57-98). Rajanikanta Bordoloi’s novels such as ‘Monomoti’ also depict the picture of strong women such as Pamili who came on their own in the male dominated world.

In a period, when women’s education was entangled with superstition and they were struggling to be part of the public sphere and gain rights, it is most likely that women’s contribution to literary works would be negligible. However, the revolutionary step to break the image of victimhood and raise the voice of agency came through some educated women in their literary contribution in Assam. Chandrababha Saikia’s first piece “Devi” possibly the first short story published by an Assamese woman, appeared in Assamese magazine Banhi in 1921 under the maiden name of Kumari Chandrababha Das. The theme of the story represents the struggle of a child widow, was presented in a manner that the feminist perspective in it became visibly evident. This may be considered as a unique way of presenting literary works which tries to break the existing patriarchal structure. Saikiani’s rigorous pursuit of gender equality was later on reflected in her Novel ‘Pitri-Bhitha’ published in 1937, which can be considered as the first Assamese novel by a women writer dealing with feminism. Saikiani’s contribution is very unique in that period considering the sensitivity of the subject matter ‘Pitri-Bhitha’ dealt with. Dandinath Kalita’s ‘Sadhana’ in 1928 also expressed feminist concerns albeit limited manner. However, issues of gender equality, property rights for

daughters gained strong expression in 'Pitri-Bhitha' in a very deep and engaging manner.

The entry of Baptist missionaries in Assam triggered the debate on women's education which was widely debated in the Baptist journal *Orunodoi* and in other Assamese journals of the time. This debate was basically concentrated within the visible struggle between custom and tradition and the idea of modern education for women. "The struggle between modern ideas and deep entrenched custom and traditions was strongest on the issue of western education in general and women's education and women's freedom in particular" (Mahanta, 2008, p.3). Women's issues concerning education, participation in the nationalist movement, rights and equality circulated in the late nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century through the formation of women's organizations and publication of women's magazines in Assam. Education for women not only became one of the major goals of the women's organization, but the writings of the first women's magazine 'Ghar-Jeuti' (1927-1931) further gave boost to women's issues in that period.

Mahila Samitir Itibriti (The History of Mahila Samiti), authored by Chandraprabha Saikiani, published in 1961 is considered to be a very significant testimony of the historical development of women's movement in this region. Saikiani's *Itibriti* needs to be located in a continuous historical process in the journey of understanding women's activism in Assam from the pre independence to the post-independence period. Women's mobilisation and their active role in the nationalist movement are also reflected in this work. The defiance of traditions and struggle for women's rights is expressed through the narration of the events preceding the formation of the first women's organization in Assam, the Assam Mahila Samiti.

Ghar-Jeuti, the first women's magazine in Assam needs to be seen in terms of the issues it reflected representing the two streams of writings in the construction and defiance of gender identity. It worked as a catalyst of women's activism in Assam. The formation of the first women's organization, Assam Mahila

Samiti in 1926 and the publication of 'Ghar-Jeuti' in 1927 have to be put in the context of a shift which was taking place in the larger society regarding redefinition of women's role, more specifically making them relevant in the public sphere. Although this magazine was not the mouthpiece of the organization, but it well articulated the concerns raised by the organization. Ghar Jeuti was published under the editorship of Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamalalaya Kakoti from Sivasagar. In the period marked by absence of women's education and rights, publication of this magazine is considered to be one of the revolutionary steps which fueled the silent social revolution in Assam (Mahanta in Compilation of Ghar-Jeuti, 2008, p.0.2). This was the period when only a few educated women came up to voice their concerns for the large number of women who were under deep backwardness and lacked any agency. However, the publication of such a magazine was not without the support and inspiration of educated males such as Barrister Tara Prasad Chaliha and writer Durga Prasad Majinder Baruah. In the process of the rise of women's consciousness, the efforts of a section of educated men in Assam can be seen in conformity with the ideals of the social reform movement laying the foundation of women's movement in India. The writings in the magazine can be considered an effort towards spreading consciousness amongst women about the prevailing inequalities they are subjected to. However, it cannot be argued that the writings in the magazine are entirely based on the defiance of the gendered role for women. There was also reflection on how women should continue to perform the prescribed duties without defying them. The interaction between victimhood and effort to create agency can be witnessed in a sharp manner.

In the first edition of Ghar Jeuti in 1927 two very interesting articles by women writers came up. The first one by Smt. Sashiprabha Baruah titled 'Tirutar Kartabya' (Duty of Wife/Women) reflects on the qualities of a married woman. The article very clearly indicates that the private sphere is the sphere of activity for women and they should be confined to it. Women should emulate the qualities such as tolerance, politeness, loving, caring, peace-loving and sacrificing. The field of women's activity is her family and the maintenance of the family should be

her primary duty. It says 'Trutai nijor xukhor kotha nabhabi porar xukhar karone bhabibo lage' (women should think about the happiness of others than their own, p.4). This article seems to have reinforced the existing patriarchy in Assamese society. However, in another article 'Nari Jagoran' (Women's Resurgence), by Smt. Kanaklata Chaliha there is an attempt to create consciousness amongst women regarding the inferior status they are made to live in the society. This article provided an elaboration of the rise of women's movements in various parts of the world and also pointed out how women in Assam are silent spectators of the prevailing gender inequalities which are indicative of the backwardness of the women of this part. In another piece by Smt. Chaliha 'Narir Unnati' (Women's Progress) published in the second edition, she talks about how public sphere is also a sphere of women's activity. She has highlighted how some women have taken up jobs and got education by crossing the boundaries of household, where men have also played positive role to encourage women to reach out their potentials. She writes 'I pray to God that in every Assamese household we have fathers, husbands and brothers who encourage women to engage in public life' (translation Mine, p. 22). The article further talks about how Assamese women can draw inspiration from the women who have defied the traditional roles and made progress in life.

The magazine also published articles on women's issues raised by male writers. In an article written by Durga Prasad Majinder Baruah titled 'Tirutar Thai' (Status of Women), he tries to interrogate the reasons for the inferior status of women in the society. He highlighted that biological inferiority in terms of physical strength may be considered one of the reasons for their inequality. However, the article refutes the argument by referring to various examples of how women have shown their physical strength in various wars in Europe. The heroic of Assamese women too is not alien to Assamese society, but they did not get the adequate place in the history. The pages of Ghar Jeuti well reflected the need of women's education and provided the much needed space for the debate on women's education during that period. The article written by Kamalalaya Kakoti titled

‘Assamiya Chualik Bujoni’ (Advice to the Assamese Girls) pointed out to the importance of women’s education and how parents are still very skeptical to educate their girl child. The article well reflected on the unhealthy future of a society where women are kept uneducated. The publication period of *Ghar Jeuti* was not only marked by women’s activism in Assam, but also the active period of anti-colonial movement. Some of the writings in the magazine reflect on women’s duty towards the nation through invoking some legends in Assam such as ‘Joymoti’. In an article written by Smt. Jagyadalata Duora titled ‘Joymoti’ reflected on the life of the chaste women legend in Assam, who sacrificed her life for the sake of her husband. The article depicted the women to be extreme dutiful towards husband and make extreme sacrifices. This duty is also considered to be the duty towards the motherland.

The post-independence period in Assam is marked by resurgence of host of movements primarily concerned with the question of identity. The Assam Movement once again created a space for women to become increasingly visible in the public sphere. Parallel to the intense period of the movement the publication of the women’s magazine ‘Aideor Jonaki Baat’ later known as ‘Jonaki Baat’ in the year 1983 carries a very important significance to highlight women’s issues. This magazine was published from Dibrugarh under the editorship of Aparna Mahanta and it very strongly brought the issue of gender equality to the forefront. The feminist concerns, which were raised in the thirties by a small number of women, witnessed a larger shift in the post-independence period in terms of raising issues of private-public dichotomy, the sex and gender debate and host of other issues concerning women. In the first edition of the journal Smt. Subarna Bhuyan in an article ‘Nari lajjasila, Purush Domoniya’ challenged gender inequality based on biological determinism. She pointed out how women of all societies are subjected to domination on the basis of socially constructed system establishing women as an inferior sex. Therefore, there should be clarity on the questions of gender equality, women’s freedom and security. In the first editorial of the magazine, Aparna Mahanta stressed on the role of women in the democratic movements. Dr.

Swarnalata Baruah, in her article in two editions of 1984 titled 'Puroni Axomat Narir Sthan' narrates the myth and reality of gender equality in Assam. In the March -April edition of 1986, the editorial 'Axomar Natun Sarkar: Amar Abhinandan aru Asha' emphasized that the new government which was formed after Assam Movement need to acknowledge the contribution of women and give them their due share. It talks about ensuring justice to women who faced multiple harassments during the course of the movement. This magazine constantly took up women's issues concerning women that lead to the further understanding of gender question in Assam.

It appears that both 'Ghar Jeuti' and 'Aideor Jonaki Baat' constantly engaged themselves in raising issues concerning the location of women in the larger societal set up. There has always been a voice to challenge to what exists and taken as given. The second stream of writing which is defiance of the existing system became more prominent through the engagement of women writers in the issues of gender equality and women's rights. It is also very significant to understand that both these magazines came up in very crucial historical junctures, where women's visibility in the public sphere was mediated by certain larger issues such as Nationalist movement and the Assam Movement. However, how far such representation of women's issues through magazines and also other literary work have redrawn or redefined the gender relation in the society is a much larger question to be addressed.

Concluding Remarks

To engage in understanding gender issues in the context under consideration is a difficult task in the view of the entanglement of the issue with multiple other issues. The politics of the region and mobilization around group identities make language a very sensitive issue. The understanding of gender relations in Assam is linked to how gender identity interacts with mobilization of group identities. Therefore, apart from language playing a crucial role in constructing and deconstructing gender relations, the mobilization of group identities and participation

of women in various identity movements also plays significant role to understand the unfolding of gender question in Assam. The linguistic reproduction of socially and culturally defined gender roles through literary works and the defiance and challenges to such construction interacts most often in a contradictory manner. Therefore, language itself becomes a tool of defiance, challenging which is considered to be naturally given. Literary works becomes the space to articulate women's activism and the quest for agency. The writings of the time corresponded to the rising activism of women and their effort to spread consciousness about their rights. However, the depiction of women through literary works, the challenges to a particular kind of construction of gender identity, the participation of women in various movements in Assam need to be put in a larger context to understand the gender question in Assam.

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