Book Review

Hidden in History:
Women in Northeast India

Arunima Deka


Women’s Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond is a new entrant not only in the field of women’s studies, but also in reading the Northeast India. It interestingly covers two issues of the periphery, both taken together and woven into a historical study. Mainstream history has most often failed to highlight the contribution made by women, both as subject of the period or even as an author. Meeta Deka’s work comes as an interesting engagement with the historical research in answering women’s question in the Northeast India. The author in her work engages with the realm of politics, law and economy, wherein she points out to the notion of agency. Through these interconnected areas of focus, Deka attempts to understand the ‘historical processes that slowly transformed women of Assam to being active agents of social change’ (p. xiv).

The book is neatly arranged into four chapters and a conclusion, traversing a wide terrain of writing about women and her relation with society, law, economy and politics. In the preface to the book, the author very well charts out the outline for engaging with feminist research in the Northeast India. She points to her epistemological debt to Amartya Sen’s work aptly justifying the title of her book and the importance of locating and also in projecting women as agents of change. At the very beginning the author pronounced her universe of study as the Brahmaputra valley, importantly taking cognizance of two broad facts, firstly, that the ‘meaning of gender vary from one society to another’, also adding that there are differences of class, culture and society which needs to be taken into account. Secondly, she points to the ‘historical amnesia’ (p. xvii) in writing about women. For the later, Deka feels that this attitude was challenged by many women authors, starting with Sheila Rowbotham, who have produced works attacking male dominance in society and equally emphasising women’s

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emancipation. The chapters in the book in fact are an attempt not only to historicise women rather to project her as agents of change ‘within the politico-social and economic power relations of the society’ (p. xiv). All throughout, the author attempts to analyse the notion of ‘agency’ in the socio, economic, legal and political structure of Assam and how despite various odds and challenges posed by the patriarchal structure women are able to act as catalyst. Education, efforts of social activists and political participation during the freedom struggle, powerful works of women writers have greatly contributed in this process.

The first chapter, ‘Women and Society’, like the rest of the book, starts with broad canvas of covering women in historical context, both pre colonial and post colonial society. Deka’s disciplinary training in History, aptly justifies her starting point in this chapter. She begins with a historical perspective by referring to the construction of women in myths and legends finding mention in Kalika Purana, Mahabharata, Ramayana and other epic and symbolic reification of women in the form of ‘Mother Earth’, ‘goddess Kamakhya’, ‘Shakti’ and other. Deka rightly asserts the transformation of goddess with independent identity to that of a consort exerted by male dominance and this patriarchal brahmanical domination seeped into tribal symbolism too (p. 5). In depicting women through the lens of history, Deka covers the folk tales of Tejimala, Pu Son Lan, moving to the practice of Devadasis that existed in Assam and of which reference could also be found in archaeological remains. In the pre-colonial times and even during Mughal period, the author refers to the social customs prevalent in Assam amongst various communities, which actually describe the position of women at that time. For instance, Deka opines that the customs of bride price, gadhon as prevalent in Assam, were kind of social practices which ‘were and still in favour of women’ (p. 8).

Even during the colonial period, the author observes that the women’s question was also the sphere of interference by the colonial state and imposed traditional male western values on the Assamese society. But from being eulogized in the annals of legends and myths, women, for Deka emerged as ‘agents of change’ (p. 1) through their active participation in the national struggle. This chapter has also a brief reference to the post 1947 history, and herein the author makes some interesting observation regarding changes in marriage rituals linked with surge of materialism, wherein some hitherto unfamiliar custom of sangeet, mehendi and even dowry have started to take root in Assam (p. 15). However, besides this, there are interesting changes in women working as ‘entrepreneurs’, working in beauty parlours, food processing etc, which has according to the author ‘empowered’ women. The author’s naivety seems to cloud her understanding of liberalisation and the trends in consumerism vis-à-vis women’s role, which actually puts women in more precarious position rather than enhancing her ‘social status’ as pointed out by her. Even the interesting anecdote of Anima (an interview that the author conducted) (p. 16) seems to provide very little respite at this point. The subsequent section on women writer in Assam is nothing more than a very intelligent survey of literature on women, equal reference of such comprehensive literature can also be found in various works of writers like Aparna Mahanta (2008). In covering a wider area of study, the author attempts to locate women as ‘agents of
change’, who despite all social barriers and prevalent challenges posed by patriarchal practices is able to carve or could resurrect a position for themselves, specially through the means of literature, novels, autobiographies etc.

In the chapter, on ‘Women and Law’, Deka interestingly points to the tussle between customary law and the modern juridical system, where the former was often marginalised. This chapter is an attempt to ‘explore whether there were spaces for women’s legal awareness within the traditional constrained sphere of a dominant patriarchal society in Assam’ (p. 57). The author attempts to point out the implication of Manusmriti to CEDAW on women and the strained relationship between gender and human rights. Brahminical laws, according to the author, were applicable only to the upper castes. But the tribal and other ethnic societies were governed by customary laws, which according to the author, were not much discriminatory against women and she states instances of practices like elopement, widow remarriage to make her stand clear. In the post independence period, taking help of cases from the Legal Aid Cell in Assam, Deka attempts to combine historiography and field narrative as methodological tools to understand the complexities of law and gender in society today in cases of dowry, divorce etc. Deka rightly points out to the growing contradiction in the transition of the customary laws to state controlled legal structure and the existence of gender disparity in this process.

In the third chapter, on ‘Women and Economy’, Deka attempts at a novel approach of combining history with ethnographic insights in tracing the role of women in the economy of Assam. Women’s marginalised position in the economic arena and the inherent patriarchal relation of power has also been an apparent topic of discussion for the author. She centrally points out the entrenched subordination and alienation of women from the means of production. Women have historically through wage labour, agricultural activities and procreation contributed to the sustenance of the household economy and also the state (p. 97). From the historically existing relation of fiefdom like of bandi beti to that of practice of prostitution (p. 109) existed even during the pre colonial times, to the creation of prostitute as a ‘community of women’ (p.117), attempt has been made by the author to project women as ‘agents of change’. One however needs to constantly reflect on the validity of such construction of women as attempted by the author. The focus of fourth chapter is on women’s participation in the public life of a nation and how she carved an identifiable space for herself and the simultaneous growth of feminist movement. Using Lyotard’s construction of ‘little narratives’, the author reiterates the important contribution made by the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti , Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti etc, in the Indian nationalist movement. At the critical juncture of Gandhi’s visit to Assam, Deka notes of the contribution made by many forefront women leaders like Nalinibala Devi, Ganeshwari Devi, Girija Devi, Chandraprova Saikia and others. But, is the participation of a group of elite women a pointer towards emancipation of a vast majority of women? She further reinforces the distinction of public/private patriarchy, specially during the colonial struggle, wherein participation in political arena ‘public’ was an extension of the weaving cloth at home i.e. private. To emphases the contribution of women in both these spheres, Deka
recreates tiring narratives around Subhas Bose and the Rani Jhansi regiment. In doing so the author in fact plays down the important contribution of a Dimasa woman, Joya Thaosen, in organising the revolutionary Dimasa Army and the impact of the Rani Jhansi regiment in the region.

Finally, the concluding chapter makes important methodological revelations and identifies newer areas of feminist research. The author rightly feels that women’s studies in the Northeast India is still a ‘virgin field’ and the book is an attempt to fill this vacuum. She summarises her attempt of identifying women’s agency in the social, legal, economic and political spheres. Not only this, in her attempt to create an ‘agency’, Deka points to the factors like role of education, political participation of women towards this aim.

In her uncritical espousal of Sen’s idea of agency and the role of education, Deka seems to overtly emphasis on the same, and in the process also considers writing women’s history as an equal exercise.

Within a vast terrain of a post modernist take on the history of women in the region and widely referring to the works of Irigaray, Kristeva, Lyotard and Foucault, Deka still falls in the trap of conventional style of writing by starting with geographical description of the Northeast India. The author portrays a large canvas of study and delves on a wide range of issues pertaining to women, attempts to answer a wide range of questions, which seems to be a very ambitious project. One can often fall trap of failure to distinguish between gendered history or history of gender as attempted by the author. Furthermore, Deka’s conception of ‘agency’ despite being taken form Sen, is somewhat found to be historically located making it difficult to explore the proactive role of the agent. Yet the book can provide interesting clue to further feminist research in the Northeast India for scholars from a wide range of disciplinary background and remain as a major text of reference.

Reference