

PUBERTY RITUAL AMONG WOMEN IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The paper will be trying to analysis the uniqueness of puberty ritual of Assamese society and how it is being carried by the women of Assamese Society. Moreover the paper will also try to highlight the taboo related to the menstruation in Assamese Society and how with time this ritual has been modified though not totally eradicate. In Assamese Society women are subjected to two kind of marriage, one: Tuloni Biya(marriage that celebrate during first menstruation, where girl is married to banana tree) and second: Bor Biya(the marriage that take place with groom). This puberty ritual is celebrated as a part of purity/pollution of Assamese where the question of gender is very much related to the notion of purity and pollution. Such ritual also brings in light how rituals are also of male and female. This puberty ritual is absolutely carried without male counterpart and they are just welcome as guest at the end of the event. So it is quite interesting to note how the entire practice is being carried and what role does it have on Assamese society and its culture.

Key words: *Puberty, ritual, Taboo, purity, pollution, gender, Tuloni Biya.*

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INTRODUCTION:

To begin with, it would be relevant if we focus on the Sociology of Rituals before dealing with the particular rituals of the study. The term 'ritual' etymologically derived from the Latin word 'Ritus' which means "customs". Ritual has a different meaning in different aspects such as social, magic, metaphysical rites and myth. Here puberty and marriage ritual are social and has a religious dimension to it.

Durkheim in his book 'Elementary Forms of Religious Life' mentioned that there are two main types of rituals. The first group includes the sacrificial, imitative, commemorative and the peculiar rites that form the 'positive cult'. The second group consists of taboo and ascetic rites, constituting the 'negative cult'. Apart from the positive rituals that contribute to the smooth functioning of the society, the negative rituals also exercise a positive functioning of the religious and moral value in the society. Here to talk about, puberty ritual which sometimes describes as negative but description field clearly indicates in positive functioning in the individual life and society.

Every society 'whether western or eastern' is bound by rituals in some or other ways. The rituals find expression through the practice of rites that are rites of Passage tracing the person living and changing societal roles, bringing together cultural and physical processes of human living. Moreover, the interplay of biological and cultural facts is at the heart of all rituals. For example, the Puberty ritual in Assamese Hindu society is marked by both cultural and biological experience of women life.

In the book 'Rites of Passage', Arnold Van Gennep described the first step towards the development of a classification was to make a separation of rites into two kinds, i.e., the sympathetic action that rooted in the belief system of correlative action like that of life and dead as considered by Taylor and Contagious rites that are dynamics rites based on concept of power, belief and are characteristically material and transmissible.

Moving into the study, Puberty is that social customs which mark the status of women life from one stage to another, from one social role or position to another. However India being a vast country with diverse culture, there exist diversity in Hindu rituals of Rites of Passage with differ cultural value. The division of north-south, east-west is also visible in their culture with immense division and thus in Hindu customs and rites. Particularly focusing on the area of study, Assamese Hindus have their own norms, customs and rites. Puberty Ritual Study can highlight such differences in Hindu society in India and their specificity but to deal with puberty or menstruation is unique to some places and culture only. Therefore the study focused on the Puberty ritual to understand or highlight how it constructs women as a person in Hindu Assamese Society. However there is also variation among the areas of Assam, but due to limitation of Time, study would carry on only two areas of Assam, i.e., Brahampur village of Nagaon District and Guwahati of Kamrup district. These areas are taken with the hope of trying to find out the comparison between rituals performed among lower Hindu caste, i.e., scheduled caste and Assamese Brahmin family. As evident from the literatures, it can be argued that the topic of menstruation is a biological event which is subjects diverse symbolical meaning in diverse culture. Moreover, the latent meaning relating to periodic clot and the norms that are practiced during menstrual cycle has put the subject in the anthropological studies of purity/impurity, taboo and pollution(Gottlieb). The widespread occurrence of menstrual taboos and their cross-cultural similarities has an urge for their universal origin and wellspring of the social

organization (Durkheim, 1897:50) (Gottlieb). Moreover, according to Douglas, there is also a religious phenomenon or thought associated with menstruation(Douglas).

While menstruation has its own biological regularity, but it's symbolic meaning and valences vary both cross-culture and within a single culture(Gottlieb). However, the majority of ethnographic work on menstrual custom and belief has been restricted to the meaning of menstrual blood and thus taken as symbolically dangerous. But recent studies of menstruation describe it as a cross-cultural construct which includes varying context of menstrual symbolism, the ambiguity of such symbolism, the possibility of intra-cultural diversity in its meaning and the interface of between biology and culture which is very witnessing in the field and thus these urges for the new inquiry into its meaning, symbol and interpretation with reference to cultural values(Gottlieb). The female oppression theory of F.W.Young(1965) and Young and Bacdayan(1965) that argues menstrual taboos often apply to native women through-out their middle years and thus lead to the lower status of women than men(F.W.Young)(Bacdayan). Moreover, Frazer highlighted that the taboos are divided, so it should be thus to be taken in the same way(Fraze).

Deborah Winslow (1980) shows the difference between taboo and menarche by studying rituals Sri-Lanka. Rosaldo(1974:38) argued that pollution belief can provide grounds for solidarity among women and depend on the cultural context, the menstrual huts can also act as sanctuaries. Thus there are many interpretations of menstruation which urge ones to rethink and revisit into the inquiry, for example: According to Honigmann(1954:124), the Kaska of western Canada take menstrual seclusion as bringing women sexual autonomy and opportunities for illicit love affairs(Gottlieb). While Buckley suggests menstrual seclusion relates with spiritual and economic enhancement rather than suppression or lower status(Gottlieb). Such interpretation of menstruation can also be witnessed in the field where on the one that there is a

narrative of celebration and on the other the taboos associated with it. For example, Mitoo Das (2008) argues about the taboos related to menstruation in Assam and the concept of pollution associated with it. But when you go down to field it is really dilemmatic to arrive at such conclusion because on the one hand, the people relate with Ambuvachi Mela which is worship of Goddess Kamakhya and old narration argues it as a way of providing rest to the woman as well. Thus completing negating it might mislead us and so requires further research on it.

The study focusing from broad concept of sociology of Religion and Ritual and puberty ritual and menstruation norms in Larger Hindu Society and thereby trying to understand the rituals in context of Assamese Hindu Culture and its sociological impact. Thus, highlighting the role of rituals in construction of Womanhood and therefore trying to understanding the transition that goes from menstruation to marriage of a woman. Menstruation is that unavoidable custom of woman life in Assamese Hindu society. There has been much interpretation of menstruation and its diversity with the Hindu Society from the Scholars like Iravati Karve, E.Valentine Daniel, Denise L. Lawrence, and Thomas Buckley and so on. However, the study trying to narrowing down and examine in terms of Assamese Culture. In the paper, I am trying to analysis and understand the uniqueness of construction of women as a person from puberty ritual to marriage in Assamese Hindu Society and how with modern times its rigidity has been lighten and maintain according to convenience of the family and how it signify the construction of women. Moreover the paper also tries to highlight how the taboo related to the menstruation has been modified though not totally eradicate. Thus the paper will be dealing with production of new ritual to represent and maintain cultural speciality of Assam and how with modernisation it has become matter of convenience, yet exercise to maintain the gender superiority of male. Such ritual also brings in light how rituals are also of male and female.

Methodology: A study on Ritual cannot be fulfilled without field analysis for which a field study is conducted where participant observation, group interaction, interviews are used as tools for proper analysing of the study with the limited time available. However secondary sources are also equally relevant as a particular study always starts with literatures survey. The sampling is basically snow ball in which informants are getting to connect through known contacts in Guwahati and elder people of the village. Moreover the study cannot be named as complete ethnographic since it is not solely based on field rather an analysis of the literature available with special reference to field. An historical approach found to be beneficial for tracing and understanding the origin and emergence of the concern rituals. A socio-historical approach enables a researcher to uncover many latent meaning and reality associate with the functioning of particular practice which otherwise remain unnoticed or misinterpreted. Thus studying rituals or in other words practice of any society from sociological lenses makes the study more critical and comprehensive.

Objective of the study: Based on the statement of the problem, the objectives of the study are as follows:-

- To understand the role of initiative ritual in constructing womanhood in Assamese Hindu Society.
- To highlight the continuity and change that comes in Puberty ritual of Assamese society with times

Result: Assam (ancient Kamarupa) is the place known as the first and the principal center of Shakti worship. Thus women here are respected as a representation of Goddess Kamakhya. Women were considered as the backbone of the social life and therefore they attain a respectable place in the society and family in older Assam which is also represented through virgin worship that is prevailing in Kamakhya and another pilgrim in Assam. This virgin worship is beyond any caste differences. Within such

special position, there was the celebration of women adulthood through puberty ritual known as "Tuloni" Biya but with times such celebration deteriorates the position of women as taboo and restriction imposed on it.

There is both social and biological construction of human from boy to manhood; from girl to womanhood. Being focus on women, menstruation or puberty is one such dimension that leads to the construction of girl into womanhood both socially and biologically. And such construction of women as a person starts from puberty and goes through marriage to motherhood. In such social construction of women rituals are an integral part be it Hindu, Islam, or any other religious community. Hindu society cannot be imagined without rituals. Hindu Rite of Passage mention about ritual "Ritusuddhi" of women which is the rare topic of discussion. There were social systems that signify this event and the related phase in a girl's life. In Assam, the construction of girl as women start with a ritual called "Tuloni Biya" which is performed to commemorate the attainment of womanhood status to a girl. The celebration of first menstruation through a symbolic ritual that is almost equivalent to the marriage in Assam is known as Tuloni Biya. It is a ritual distinct to many Assamese groups who have their own theories about its significance and origins.

In Assam, women are subjected to two kinds of marriage, one: Tuloni Biya(a marriage that celebrates during first menstruation, where the girl is married to banana tree) and second: Bor Biya(the marriage that takes place with groom). The marriage is exercised as an attainment of adulthood and as a ritual for cleaning the pollution associated with it so that her future in-laws' is fortunate. It is said that this system of puberty ritual (marriage) earlier came into being in Assamese society as a symbolic invitation to the Ahom king and princes for a marriage proposal that their daughter is eligible for marriage which with times associated with taboos and restriction. Apart from Assam, such ritual can be evident in south part of India and Nepal etc. This

puberty ritual is celebrated as a part of purity/pollution whole of Assam but every less study can be evident, so on that note, it is very important to discuss, critically analysis such event or phenomena of Assamese society where the question of gender is very much related to the notion of purity and pollution. Women, as polluted so, require purity ritual like death rituals that maintain to clean the pollution. This puberty ritual is absolutely carried without male counterpart and they are just welcome as a guest at the end of the event. So it is quite interesting to note how the entire practice is being carried and what role does it have on Assamese society and its culture.

Discussion: Assamese society has its own ideas about 'pure' and 'polluted' which are implicated in their religious and social life. The state of menstruation in Assamese term is known as Chuwa which is analogous to pollution or impurity. It is associated with "filthy" fluid releasing from a woman's body. While menstruating if they touch any animate or inanimate substance, it becomes impure too. In order to safeguard the social and cosmological order of a society, menstruation being adjusted as a pollutant and has also been rendered with restrictions which are meant to act as protection for the menstruating woman, as it allows rest for those days and also as protection for the rest of the world, which ideally does not come in contact with the menstruating woman and thus remain pure. During the days if she is a young girl is not sent to school. She is not allowed to cook for those three days and her food is placed in front of her during meal hours. She is not allowed to do any manual work. She is not allowed to touch plants. Most importantly, she is not allowed to go to the prayer house. She is forbidden from performing any religious activities. Finally on the eighth day, when one stop bleeds completely, can enter the religious realm of the household i.e. the puja ghar. This monthly process begins from the next menstruation after the puberty ritual. Thus Puberty rituals become the landmark of women for entering into a new social position(Das).

There is a religious factor to the taboos of menstruation. The kitchen is taken as Goddess Place and certainly, the prayer house. So, since a woman is Suwa or polluted, she is best kept away from these places which specify purity. The menstrual taboos of the Assamese women are also associated with Ambuvachi or Xaat which falls during the month of June'22nd every year and is the time when Goddess Kamakhya menstruates. The taboos and the restrictions are much more rigid during the time for women who menstruate. In fact, the seclusion is like the first menstrual separation ritual. Though we can witness a kind of taboo associated with menstruation in Assam but we also evident celebration as attainment of adulthood which even synonymous with celebration the great goddess Kamakhya's Ritu(mense) and thus followed by such system of Tuloni Biya where the same ritual carried as that of in Kamakhya 's Mense in every year for cleaning and making her eligible for worship again after four days of seclusion.

Thus it is very relevant to note how from puberty to marriage ritual, construction of women fortune in Assamese society and how with the ritual their construction as a person begin and finally goes through marriage ritual. Beginning with the menstruation, the life of women in Hindu society, as well as other society, undergoes many changes both socially and biologically and through marriage, these change steps ahead socially that celebrate the attainment of adulthood in any society. In Hindu society, such change of social role is marked by certain rituals which are also the same case in Assamese Hindu society but unlike the other Hindu society, Assamese society practice some unique feature of it. One such practice is the existing two kind of marriage that characterized the women living in Assamese society. Thus the study of such rituals that construct the Assamese Hindu society would be relevant to understand their uniqueness and specialty as well as differences from the other Hindu society.

Conclusion: Though this work is still in progress but to conclude this paper as a piece of it, I would like argue that so far as the ritual of puberty in Hindu Assamese society is concern, truly it is a cultural and religious phenomena which is confined to Assamese people of Assam. Moreover, this ritual has its own symbolic meaning and understanding and thus performs a vital function in holding Assamese cultural specificity. Hinduism in India is marked by different rituals that hold immense importance in individual life, yet the celebration of menstruation as ritual involving entire village or in cities the every known family and relatives as well as the locality household to be part of it almost a kind of marriage however only cultural aspect of Assamese Society. Thus culture carries a special position in upholding one's religious idea as well. Menstruation in Assamese society specifies both cultural aspect of community and biological aspect of women body which might also imply that body indeed is very important in Assamese Hindu society. As Radcliffe-Brown argues that the function of rituals that carried in the passage of individual's life is to restore the moral consensus that is being disturbed through the changes in the social life. Menstruation initiates that change in one's social life or position or role for which Assamese people has its own theory and way of exercising it. Menstruation celebration or custom is an old age phenomena dated from the Ahom Rule in Assam but however with time it rigidity increases and again with post-modern era it changes its norms according to convenient yet it is continue to practice to maintain the cultural specificity which in turn way also implies an submissive culture over women. So Menstruation or Puberty Ritual or Tuloni Biya or Marriage Ceremony in Assamese Society holds two contrasts view one of negative attitude towards women's biological reality and thus taken them as impure needed to be purified through rituals and on the other hand it also connotes a positive view on women which seems to be absent in many other society that they celebrate the menstruation of Women as a new turn of women life towards society which is also evident in the field that the old age group people stand for its positive sides arguing it as

respect and giving rest to the lady from homely responsibility while the young age group argues it as negative citing that though they are viewed as impure or polluted and specially with modern time and emergence of nuclear family this custom of menstruation seems to be more dilemmatic since women are allowed to go outside and work during menstruation but again back to home this understanding of pollution is still prevailing.

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