Reminiscences of Yore

Let us go back in time to about seventy years from now. I am certain that the present generations will never be able to comprehend the social and cultural canons that dictated conduct and the constraints that were imposed on the women by the society of those times.

There is no semblance between the way the female members of respectable families lived and behaved in those times to the way women from the Assamese upper classes live today. I have been an interested witness to this process of evolution that has taken place over the years.

When we were young, all residences were demarcated in a manner that kept the women of the household secluded. Most houses had two courtyards, one in the front of the house and one at the back. The yard in the front, which the sitting room faced, was called the frontyard. Bedrooms, kitchen and the room housing the household gods, known as the *naamghar*, were cordoned off with a bamboo fence for privacy. The ladies of the house almost never came out to the front courtyard. And outsiders could never step into the inner sanctum. My father, Ramakanta Baruah's ancestral home in Dibrugarh also conformed to these regulations.

Girls, in those days, were brought up by their guardians with a despotic firmness. They could play about uninhibitedly around the house and even in the frontyard till they were about seven or eight years old. The moment they attained puberty, severe restrictions were enforced on them. They were now considered to be ready for marriage. In Brahmin families, the rules were even more stringent.

If a girl was not married of before she reached puberty, the entire family was in danger of being declared as social outcasts.

Pubescent girls had to go through an elaborate ceremony called *toloni biya*, which was a kind of a proxy wedding. The celebrations were similar to those of a small wedding. The young girl was kept in complete isolation from male company for the first four days after attaining puberty. She was allowed a frugal diet of milk and fruits during the day and a vegetarian meal in the evening. She had to remain indoors those few days. On the fourth day, she was bathed in the traditional manner after an application of turmeric and lentil paste by all the neighbourhood ladies. On the seventh day, relatives and neighbours, all ladies, were formally invited for a meal. The girl was bathed ceremonially once again and made to prostrate herself before a banana tree, the substitute for a groom. She was then decked like a bride and the assembled ladies made a bundle which was called *konai*, with a few *gamosas* or Assamese handwoven towels. This bundle was first placed on the bride's lap. Then, all the ladies took turns to circulate the *konai* from the bride's lap onto theirs and put gifts of money in a bowl. Whatever sum was collected was considered to be a gift to the bride. I have observed that though social conventions have evolved a great deal because of changing times, some of these archaic rituals have persisted to the present day.

Attaining puberty hence became a fearful proposition for young girls who dreaded the sudden rigorous checks on their freedom. Many girls greeted this physiological change with tears and trepidation because they knew that for them, the days of unadulterated happiness and carefree living were over.

A girl had to change her entire lifestyle the moment she became a young adult. She had to discipline her conduct and become careful in her public behaviour. Whether she was ten or fourteen was inconsequential. I vividly remember a childhood incident which shows how deeply these discriminations affected young minds.

One day, a huge procession went past our house in Dibrugarh. The sound of the musical instruments attracted all the children and

we rushed outside. My elder sister also came running out of the house excitedly, but she was forced to go back by my elder brother. He told her to watch the procession by peeping through the bamboo fencing. My sister was perhaps ten years old at that time. But she had recently attained puberty and was considered to be an adult. I remember how hurt and shamed she was on that day. But, as girls in those days were taught to accept all impositions without a murmur of protest, she suffered in silence.

Expertise in weaving was an essential pre-requisite for girls who were ready for marriage. Lack of this skill formed a huge lacuna in a girl's accomplishments. The mothers, therefore, took the responsibility of teaching their daughters weaving, embroidery and all other necessary domestic competencies very seriously.

Girls from wealthy families never went to school during our childhood days. But Dibrugarh was the first town in Assam where one or two primary schools for girls were started. However, it was an accepted norm in families like ours that a daughter would remain cloistered in the inner quarters of her parents' house till she got married and left for her in-laws' place.

If we ever went visiting or attended a social occasion, we travelled in shuttered bullock carts or in closed horse carriages. Unlike the present times, women never walked alone on the streets. Even elderly women, on a visit to a neighbour's house, were escorted by a trusted servant holding a *borjapi*, a large bamboo sun hat, that covered her face. Most often, the women went out in groups of two or three, but never alone.

Women in those days, were never entrusted with any other responsibilities besides the smooth running of the household. Parents considered themselves to be fortunate if a girl could be married off early. I have already mentioned how girls from Brahmin families were given in marriage even before they attained puberty. So the guardians started their quest for a suitable boy as soon as the girl showed signs of growing up. If they failed to find a groom, the parents would risk social ostracism and would perhaps be branded as outcasts.

An incident that took place in our neighbourhood comes to my mind. There was a cluster of Brahmin families residing close to where we lived. I remember we called that particular locality Brahmin *Souk*. Jadunath Baruah was one of the prominent residents of that community and also perhaps the richest. We occasionally visited some of these families with our mother and thus developed a cordial relationship with the daughters.

Jadu Baruah had several daughters. The first two were married off at the right time. These Brahmin girls continued to live with their parents till the time they attained puberty. So, it was considered normal for a married girl to live in her parental home for two to three years after marriage.

When Jadu Baruah's third daughter approached marriageable age, he could not find a suitable husband for her. The anxious father travelled to different towns of Assam, but a match proved elusive. He knew full well the implications of this failure and grew desperate. The entire neighbourhood shared his worries because the social strictures were so rigid and implacable. There was a *bai* named Soyoni who earned her livelihood by doing odd jobs in all the houses in the locality. She was also the carrier of information to all the ladies of the neighbourhood. I remember my mother questioning her about Jadu Baruah's predicament. It remained impressed in my young mind how a daughter's marriage could cause so much of concern not merely to the family, but also to the neighbourhood.

Jadu Baruah could not find a totally acceptable groom for his daughter. Time was running out. So he was forced to marry her off to an elderly man. Unfortunately, the girl was widowed within three years of marriage. Baruah brought her back home because life for a widow in her in - laws' house was intolerable. She would be subjected to abject humiliation and often tortured beyond measure, by the family. But when she came home, he had to experience a very different kind of mental pressure. A Brahmin widow, whatever her age might be, had to undergo untold physical and mental deprivations and restrictions no matter where she lived.

It was a most painful situation for the parents. But they could do nothing except silently witness their daughter's sufferings. From the moment her husband died, a Brahmin girl had to forsake all physical comforts, all hopes of a normal life. She had to wear white and observe hundreds of impositions regarding food, behaviour and dress. For a young girl, widowhood was like the end of life. It needed exceptional strength of character and mind to be able to conform to all the rules and carry on with life. And for the parents, it was heartbreaking to watch a young girl give up everything enjoyable in life.

Baruah's daughter must have been the same age as me. For, I remember mulling over the incident and wondering why a girl could not stay at home with her parents instead of being married off for convenience's sake. An inchoate perception about the assertion of one's fundamental rights started taking root and entrenching itself in my mind as time went by. The irresistible urge to protest against the plight of women must have been engendered in my consciousness at that very point of time.

Even in those times, there were a number of parents who would have liked to educate their daughters to a certain level instead of keeping them completely illiterate. But they did not dare to defy the overpowering social strictures about sending girls to school or even educating them at home. No one wanted to arouse widespread public condemnation by attempting such a course.

However, there were a few who veered away from the beaten track.

My paternal aunt, Deviprobha Dutta had two daughters named Durgaprobha and Hemoprobha. An extremely progressive lady for her time, my aunt went and stayed in Calcutta for several years in order to educate her daughters. This bold step brought on a lot of criticism but she remained unperturbed. Both the girls studied in Bethune School. When her older daughter was in Class IX, my aunt came back to Assam with her, leaving the younger one in the school hostel. Durgaprobha got married to the late Dr. Bipin Bora.

Hemoprabha continued with her education. She cleared her Entrance examination and went back to Calcutta to complete the F.A course.

I was about eight years old at the time when my life changed dramatically. My eldest brother Rajanikanta Barua had cleared his Entrance examination and was planning to go to Calcutta for higher studies. *Kokaideu*, as I called my elder brother, was extremely fond of me and expressed the desire to take me with him. He suggested that I could stay with Hemoprobha *Baideu*, (an Assamese term for elder sister) and study in Bethune School. He brushed aside my parents' apprehensions and insisted on my accompanying him. My own feelings were ambivalent. I did not want to let him down but I did not want to leave home either.

My brother's persistence wore away all objections and I embarked on the first adventure of my life. We started out by steamer to Goalundo (now in Bangladesh), travelling with several Bengali gentlemen. They made both *Kokaideu* and me comfortable and chatted with us throughout the journey. I was miserable at leaving home. Besides, I did not know Bengali. Hence, I remained silent for most of the journey. However, my lack of communication skills did not go unnoticed. When we were about to board the train for Calcutta, one of our fellow travellers stopped me and said in Bengali, "We spent so much time together but we never heard your voice. When you come back from Calcutta, you have to talk. There will be no escape for you." I did not understand what he said so I remained mute. It was my brother who translated his words for me.

We reached Calcutta in the evening and headed for Bethune School in a horse carriage. All arrangements for my stay in the hostel had been previously worked out. The gate - keeper informed my cousin Hemoprabha. She immediately came down to meet us. My brother's affectionate name for her was *soru aiti*, young lady. He now entrusted her with the responsibility of looking after me. *Baideu* told him not to worry. After he left, she carried me up the stairs to the sleeping quarters. In those days, the evening meal was served in hostels at about 4.00 pm. My cousin had kept some food for me

but I was not hungry. I was feeling terribly homesick and lost and went to bed immediately.

My first days in Bethune school were nightmarish. The medium of instruction was Bengali and I had no knowledge of the language. Except for the intermittent conversations in Assamese with Hemoprabha *Baideu*, I had to remain silent most of the time. And *Baideu* did not like talking to me in our mother tongue when other girls were present. First, because they were suspicious of what we were talking about in an unfamiliar language. And also because they often made fun of Assamese, comparing it to the staccato sounds of the Oriya language.

Initially, when *Baideu* conversed with the senior girls in fluent Bengali, I understood nothing. I was petrified that I would never be able to master the language. I had been admitted to a lower class in school. Gradually, as I became friends with my classmates, my inhibitions vanished. I started talking to them in Bengali, unconcerned about the mistakes I made. As the days went by, I found that my command over Bengali was increasing rapidly. This was aided by the fact that in school, lessons were conducted in Bengali. My growing friendship with the girls in my class also helped me to pick up the nuances of the language.

In the Calcutta of those days, Hindu and Brahmo girls were beginning to attend schools. The Brahmo Samaj was a liberal arm of Hinduism and espoused higher education for girls. But Hindu girls in Calcutta, as in Assam, were still married off early. There was a girl named Saraju in my class. A few months after I joined school, her marriage was arranged. Her husband's residence was a two-storied building just opposite our hostel. The day after the wedding, I remember watching from an upstairs window, Saraju arriving at her new husband's home in a palanquin. She was dressed in all her bridal finery, her head covered in the traditional manner. She had lifted the curtain and had glanced at our hostel, perhaps guessing that she was being watched.

I was still very young in those days, my mind unformed and immature. Although I was settling down in school, I was not happy.

Whenever I wrote to my family, my constant refrain was that I did not want to return to school after the summer vacation. Somehow I had imbibed the idea that it was a matter of shame for a girl to be educated. My two cousins had to face a lot of criticism for pursuing studies in Calcutta. I did not want to be at the receiving end of public derision. So, I refused to go back to Calcutta when the summer holidays ended. I had attended Bethune School for nine months only. My father and brother tried to change my mind, but in vain. I clung to the notion that educated girls were looked down upon by our society.

I reverted to my old ways and spent time playing with friends. Studies and school no longer figured in my universe. But I loved to play games about my school and the teachers, about how we were taught, scolded and praised. By this time several primary schools for girls had been established in Dibrugarh. A few of the neighbourhood girls had joined. But my parents were against sending me to a local school. Girls walking on the roads, even if it was to a school, was unacceptable to them.

As I grew older, my initiation into weaving and other household work began. My movements were curtailed drastically. Even the front courtyard became a prohibited area. My shortlived education had fortunately enabled me to read. So I read the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Kirtana*. Every house had its own *naamghar*, a room where the family gods were kept. The women of the household looked after the *naamghar*, organised the *pujas* and the daily offerings. They also sang religious hymns which we called *naam* every evening.

I remember singing naams with my paternal grandmother. She was a firm believer of Radha - Krishna and told us stories about the playful god and his many exploits with the *gopis* and *gopinis*. Every evening, after the *naam* was over, my grandmother would pray to the dark god- "O Lord of the Universe, please bless me so that I am not reborn. Take me to live with you and your *gopis* in your heavenly abode."

It was customary that girls from Brahmin families were to be married by the time they were 9 years old. But in upper class non-Brahmin families, the parents began to worry if a girl remained unmarried at fifteen. In our family of four sisters, the two older ones were married at a very young age. My eldest sister got married to Shri Bishnu Prasad Duara and the second one to Shri Indibor Chaliha.

I recall my parents gradually becoming concerned about my marriage. I had two elder brothers, Rajani Kanta and Rohini Kanta. The older one was a businessman and the younger one, a doctor. They took an active interest in the proposals that came for me. The differences of opinion and the discussions that took place had a profound effect on me. I felt that I had become a source of anxiety for the entire household. If I remained unmarried, all these tensions would disappear. I now thought about my two cousins who had opted for education in Calcutta. If I could go away to study, maybe the problems that my family was facing would be resolved.

My cousin Hemoprabha, with whom I had stayed in Calcutta, was now the Principal of the Girls' M. E. School in Dibrugarh. She had married Dr. Hari Krishna Das, a government doctor, after passing her F.A. Hemoprabha *Baideu's* qualifications and knowledge of English had made her a viable candidate for the post of the Principal and, in fact, the Government pressured her into accepting the post.

Baideu's career inspired me now to summon up enough courage to talk to my mother about my future. I asked her to send me and my younger sister Surabala to Calcutta. I knew that my age was a deterrent as no one would ever approve of a young adult girl going so far from home to study. I had taken a lot of time to think about the consequences of my decision before voicing my thoughts to my mother. Her reaction was what I had expected. She heatedly said, "What nonsense are you talking about? Do you have the age to study now? What will everyone say if we send you to study in Calcutta?" I felt crushed and defeated. It was a hopeless

situation. My parents had instilled in me a deep faith in God. I now prayed to Him for clarity and focus in life.

My situation made me introspect a great deal. Was I asking for something that could have an adverse effect upon my life? I only wanted to study and education was a basic human right. What kind of society were we living in that denied a girl her fundamental rights? I knew that my parents would not be able to oppose the dictates of the society, arbitrary as they might be. But my longing to study remained strong despite knowing that the obstacles were almost insurmountable. I became restless and unhappy. My mother felt my distress and talked to my father, "She wants to study so desperately. Can we arrange for her to be taught at home?"

Unfortunately, at that time, there were no lady teachers who could tutor us. At this critical juncture of my life, our house became the meeting ground for three very liberal minded, educated Assamese gentlemen. My eldest brother-in-law Bishnu Prasad Duara was transferred to Dibrugarh as a magistrate. Dr. Lakshmi Prasad Chaliha, a cousin from my mother's side, was a teacher in the Dibrugarh Berry White Medical School. Dr. Hari Krishna Das, my cousin Hemoprabha *Baideu's* husband, was also posted in Dibrugarh around that time. All three men began to visit us regularly in the evenings. I had heard my mother sit and chat about various matters with them. It so happened that the three of them were strong advocates of education and were instrumental in setting up the George School for Boys in Dibrugarh.

My mother had mentioned to them about my intense desire to study. All of them supported me and even offered to tutor my sister and me during their free time. Surprisingly, my eldest sister also expressed a desire to study at home. Her decision, after so many years of marriage and three children, confirmed my belief that many girls in those days did want to study. But they had to remain passive and silent because education for women went against the grain of the society.

In this manner began the process of our self education. My brother-in-law helped us with Mathematics and Dr. Chaliha with English. We relied mainly on our own perseverance. At times, we studied till late at night, going to bed only when our mother forced us to. Studying became a holy mission. One cardinal truth, however, emerged from our unrelenting efforts. It was that sincerity and hard work opened all doors. We were determinedly working for admission in a higher class in a Calcutta school and would let nothing come in the way.

At this time, a terrible misfortune disrupted the fabric of our family life. My second brother worked as a doctor in a tea garden named *Sukan Pukhuri*, literally meaning a dry pond. He now contacted the dreaded *Kala Zar*. There were no vaccines or medicines for the disease in those days. My brother's fever continued without remission for three long months, completely draining him. A change of scene was also tried out. My eldest brother took him to the Sundarbans and kept the family posted about his condition. The first few days in the boat saw his fever recede and the news thrilled us all. But after the initial signs of improvement, the temperature remained constantly high. Ultimately, after twenty one days, my ailing brother had to be brought back home.

One particular vignette from those traumatic days remains etched in my mind till today. My brother had become very weak and had to be carried into the house on the day of his arrival. By the time he reached his bedroom door, he was exhausted and had to sit down and rest, unable to enter the room. I remember my mother's ashen face when this happened. After he passed away, I heard her tell others- "When he could not enter his bedroom at one go, I knew that my son will not survive." To my mother, my brother's inability to enter his bedroom in a single effort, symbolised the fact that his days were numbered.

My brother expired about a week after returning home. On that fateful day, his condition had worsened from the early morning. My mother was constantly by his bedside and we were allowed to

go in and see him from time to time. He was delirious and once I heard him telling my mother to chase away the constables! I ran to the *naamghar* and prayed to God fervently for a miracle. But he died a little later. His body was carried outside and placed in the front courtyard. Everyone was inconsolable. My mother was supported by the ladies of the neighbourhood when she fainted. My eldest brother broke down completely. It was only my father, who with infinite restraint and fortitude, repeated the words- "Loknath, *Ram Ram Bola*". He was very fond of his younger son and had named him Loknath. He believed implicitly that *Ram Naam*, the name of God, should be taken for the salvation of one's soul. So he forgot his grief and urged his beloved son to seek God's benediction. Everyone present there were amazed at my father's grace under such pressure and his stoic acceptance of loss.

Gloom and sadness shrouded our entire household thereafter. My father was devastated by the loss of a much loved young son. Ever since I could remember, he used to come home only on weekends. He worked as an Assistant Superintendent in a Railway and Saw Mill company. He had to go for inspection to far off places like Makum, Margherita and Tingrai throughout the week, so he spent the weekdays away from home.

My father was a staunch believer in the *Mahapuruxiya Dharma* preached by Shri Sankardeva. He was totally against idol worship and used to tell us not to worship any other gods, not to visit houses that did and not to eat any offerings or *prasad* as it was called, made to idols. Whenever any prasad from *Devi pujas* were sent to our house by neighbours, it had to be cooked outside. My brothers were allowed to eat it but partaking of *prasad*, specially meat, was forbidden for the girls.

After my brother's death, the matter of my marriage lost priority in my parents' minds. They now thought of allowing us to study. I was overjoyed at the prospect. But another problem loomed before us. How could my sister and I leave for Calcutta, leaving our mother alone after the recent bereavement? Our eldest brother,

Rajani Kanta's business interests kept him away from the house for days. He captured elephants and hired them out to companies. Most of his time was spent in the forests and marriage was not his foremost concern for some time.

Our mother, however, started to plan for our future and discussed the possibilities of sending us to Calcutta with our brother. She was aware of all the connected pitfalls and I heard her talking to him- "I need to talk to you seriously. If they come back successful, there is nothing to worry about. They will become independent. But what troubles me is that whether they will get admission in higher classes with the little learning they have acquired at home? And after the admission, if they have to give up midway, what will their future be?"

I tried to convince my mother that with the level of our preparations we were certain to get admission - my sister into class VII and me into a class higher. I do not know whether she trusted my judgement or not, but she finally told our father that both the daughters were very keen to study in Calcutta. Although our father felt that girls should be married at the right age, he was not averse to education for women. He called us and asked a few pertinent questions. "My dears, I have been told that both of you want to go to Calcutta to study further. Do you think you will succeed? I am getting older everyday and I hope one day you will not blame me for not settling you for life." I listened to my father in silence. My respect for him had always stopped me from responding to him directly. I do not remember ever having a proper conversation with him. It was always my mother who conveyed my sentiments to him.