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The Condition and status of Assamese Widows: A historical analysis with special reference to 20th century Assam

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Abstract

Women being the essential part of the society, often become the topic of discussion either as repressed or as depressed class of society. Though these days a number of achievements earned by women come into forefront but in colonial India women were presented as weak, timorous, who needs protection in every step of life. Both the colonial as well as nationalist groups considered women issue as the best area to strengthen their position. All were busy in imposing their thoughts upon women but none of them asked women that what they desire for. Under this legitimizing mission of both the colonial as well as nationalist groups, the most repressed section was the widows. In Assam also widows had to lead a very miserable life. In this paper attempt has been made to study the status of Assamese widows, their miseries as well as reason for growing number of child widows. Moreover, this paper tries to study the problem in different societies like caste Hindu society as well as non-caste Hindu society. The debates that aroused in 20th century among the middle class section of Assamese society regarding widowhood also brought under discussion in this paper. In preparation of this paper, mainly primary sources are used along with some secondary sources.

Keywords: *Widowhood, Colonial Government, Assamese Middle Class, Women emancipation, Child- marriage, Sati, Bengali Bhadrak.*

Introduction: The 19th century Indian society was flooded with issue relating to women. Both the colonial authority as well as educated Indian middle class had took Indian women`s issue as a medium of legitimizing their views in India. Especially after the passing of Age of Consent Bill 1891, `women` became a theme of discussions for both the colonial as well as the revivalist Indians. Like that of those child brides, widows also became a huge bone of contention in between the colonial govt. along with reformist and revivalist Indians. Jaya Tyagi noted that in ancient Grhyasutras, at the death pyre of a ksatriya, the wife and a bow are to be placed to the north of the body. This alludes to the understanding that constant companions like the wife and the bow are to be placed along with the body so that they can accompany the body to the other world¹. But she remarked that the placing of the wife in the funeral pyre was symbolic gesture². But in 19th and early 20th century, it was seen

that people were very much eager in placing the wife in funeral pyre of the husband alive. No one gave any importance in taking the conscience of the petty wife. A bizarre incident was noted by Tanika Sarkar taking out a procession on 28 December 1816. The procession was of high-caste Hindu Bengali people taking a dead body along with the dead man's 14 year old wife Digambari who had taken the ritual pledge of burning to death alongside the corpse of her husband³. Being a daughter in law of a high caste Brahmin family, this commitment of self-immolation legitimized her walk on public road. Thus the conscience of the girls was of no importance. Moreover widow's consent to immolation was a product of her socialization, her ignorance of authentic scripture, her social helplessness, and the stigma attach to widowhood.

Like that of Sati system another aspect related to widowhood is prohibition in widow remarriage. As Bengal was the epicentre of social reform movement, a strong voice was raised in favour of widow remarriage by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. In the year 1856 the govt. passed another regulation abrogating an earlier legal and prescriptive prohibition against remarriage of Hindu widows. It also underwrote the inheritance rights of sons born of remarriage. The Assamese caste Hindu society also had the rules and regulations relating to widowhood. Though many cultural aspects of Bengal touched Assamese middle class people but Sati system was not seen among them.

Objectives:

- ❖ To study the concept of widowhood in Assamese society.
- ❖ To study the extent of prevalence of widowhood in different societies of Assam.
- ❖ To study the condition of widows especially child widows in colonial Assam.
- ❖ To search out the reason behind growing numbers of child widow.
- ❖ To study the debate concerning widow remarriage among Assamese middle class.

Methodology: In order to prepare the paper, data which are essential basically collected from primary sources like journals, newspapers, magazines, and other literary sources of colonial period that are available. Secondary sources like research journals, unpublished research thesis, books are also used. To interpret the data, analytical method has been used.

Customs Related to Widowhood: Widowhood was like a curse for caste Hindu Brahmin ladies in Assam. The early marriage of girls with aged persons often resulted in the creation of child widow. Like their fellow girls of Bengal, Assamese girls also had to spend a very hard and restricted life after becoming widow. But while discussing the life of widow in Assam it is quite noticeable that the rules and restriction varies in different societies. Among Shudra communities of Assam rules and regulations were little bit flexible for widow. But the ultimate oppressions were seen in caste Hindu Society. In pre-independence period of Assam serious debates were seen in the pages of journals, autobiographies, novels, short stories etc regarding widow remarriage. Moreover the stories written by Deshpran Laxmidhar Sharma, Sneha Devi, Chandraprava Saikiani reveals the behaviour of society towards widow during 19th and 20th century.

In Bengal, among the caste Hindus, it was seen that at the death of the husband the wife was also immolated in funeral pyre of the husband. But in Assam this systems of Sati was not seen except a record is found in Arunodoi where news of immolation of Sati in Sivasagar, Keyapur was reported⁴. As it was a norm of Caste Hindu society to give their girls in marriage prior to attainment of puberty, parents often were in a panic situation when they failed to find a suitable groom. At this juncture many cases were seen that girls of 10-11 years sometimes given to marriage with a person who was 3/4 times elder than that of the bride. This marriage resulted with the death of the husband just after 2/3 years of marriage. A close Brahmin friend of Rajbala Das was a victim of such custom. She was the third daughter of one Jadunath Baruah. As she grew older and was at the deadline of puberty, her father failed to search out a suitable groom for her. But to escape from social defamation finally she was given into marriage with a very elderly person. The marriage resulted into the death of the husband after 2/3 years and thus she became a child widow who had to come to her natal home and lead a vary celibate life wearing plain white cloth, chanting the name of god, taking vegetarian meal only one time a day⁵. Dharmada Devi, aunt of Nalinibala Devi became widow at the age of fourteen⁶. A widow was debarred from enjoying any kind of luxury in life. She has to lead a very pious life. Nirmolprova Bordoloi in her autobiography mentioned about one child widow whom she refers as Bhabani Baidew. Bhabani Baidew at the mere age of 7/8/ years had lost her husband. Another child widow was referred as Anna Bai who became a widow prior to attainment of puberty even without seeing the face of her husband. Both these child widows without knowing about what is marriage, what is a husband, what is a conjugal life had to bear the misery of widowhood at a very mere age. They were prohibited from eating buffalo milk, curd, butter, spices like garlic, onion and even could not eat lentils⁷. To subdue the sexual desire of those widows they were kept in excessively religious atmosphere rather than thinking about their remarriage.

Nalinibala Devi while returned back to her natal home after losing her husband, her father Nabin Ch. Bordoloi unlike other parents took entire responsibility of her and according to her, father Nabin Ch. Bordoloi fulfilled every single bit of necessity of his daughter but her grandmother refused to see her in the plain white attire and asked her to wear silk cloth whenever she appear in front of her grandmother. At this Nabin Ch. Bordoloi supports his daughter saying that the whole life he watched his daughter in different attire now at this moment he wishes to see her in *Sarbasukla Mahasweta* attire wearing white cloth⁸. At this point it is quite imaginable that to what extent the father gets hurt seeing a young daughter as a widow yet he could not able to break the strict norms of society that were set for a widow. Nalinibala Devi was often given the advice to be virtuous and the elderly persons of the family created a spiritual atmosphere in the family by giving spiritual advice, maintenance of strict diet debar from using any kind of cosmetic items⁹. Keeping in unbearable seclusion actually intended to make them celibate. Celibacy was imposed upon them and remarriage of widow was like a sin during those days. Those who were in favour of a celibate life of a widow often took help of some hymns of Dharma Sastras. However, widow marriage was not absent among non-caste Hindu Assamese

society but even among those who practiced it, was not at all considered to be a respectful act, and the woman was not given status equal to a woman married for the first time. A widow came to be called with derogatory terms like *dhemani*, or *batolu*¹⁰. Prof. D. Nath remarked in his *Satra, Society and Culture*¹¹ at the condition of widows in 19th century as follow:

Assamese Hindu society in 19th century being continuation of the medieval set-up based on the *smriti* or the *dharma sastra* codes treated women as mere commodities to be used by men. Unlike in other parts of India, *sati* was a rare practice here, yet there was another great evil-prohibition of widow remarriage (*batolu bibah*) and encouragement of child marriage. In the rural society of Assam a widow was sometimes married, but such a marriage was a kind of handing over of the widow to a person by her parental family, or on rare occasions, by the family of the in-laws unceremoniously and without giving her the status of being a wife, in order to save themselves from the criticism of the society. It was a popular saying that a woman can be married only once, she cannot be married for second time. It was natural that most husbands who were at least thrice (the older) in age of the girl, died in those days earlier than their young wives for that matter, and the widowed wives had to bear all sorts of insults and atrocities from her in-laws and the society.

Seeing all those miseries, Padmawati Devi Phukononi in her article “*Bidhoba*” published in the journal *Banhi* termed widowhood as “dangerous” and “harsh”¹². Moreover, she herself faced the miseries of widowhood in her own life. Though she condemned those norms prevailed in the society relating to widowhood but being a lady of 20th century, she felt pride in dying as a *sadhaha*¹³. Durgeswar Sharma’s story *Bidhoba-Ne-Sadhaha-Ne-Kumari* published in *Banhi* also showed the condition of a Brahmin child widow ‘*Son*’. A clear picture was shown through this story that how a child without knowing the wedlock and the husband, she had to accept the ultimate tragedy of her life. Durgeswar Sharma asked a number of questions through the Child Character ‘*Son*’ to the society against its rigid norms towards a widow¹⁴. Lakhminath Bezbaruah in his autobiography wrote about his elder sister who became a widow without seeing her husband’s face. He lamented with sorrow by expressing the condition of the widow ‘*Piyaali*’, how she remained unwantedly in her natal home as a symbol of the sorrow, grief and bearing the rigid rules and regulation of widowhood¹⁵. Apart from these personal experiences, a number of stories published in the journals of 20th century which also reveals the miseries of widows. Lakshmidhar Sharma wrote a number of short stories which were published in *Awahan* and *Chetona*. The short story ‘*Robin*’ shows how the society was biased regarding a widow who was thrown out of the village after giving birth to a child because of the love relation of the widow with a neighbouring man¹⁶. Though it is a short story yet as it came out from the contemporary society so it can be clearly assumed the attitude of society towards a helpless widow. Another story by the same author ‘*Bidhobar Lora*’ also showed how widow fought with poverty to maintain her livelihood and her small family with her only son, whereas the entire society was not in favour of her¹⁷. Women writer Sneha Devi also wrote a number of short stories taking the theme of widow of Assam. Though these stories are mere fiction but

the root of all these stories were contemporary society. Thus an assessment can be easily made through those short stories about the miseries of widowhood of late 19th and early 20th century Assam.

Apart from those literary sources, the census report of 1891¹⁸ had also revealed some issues.

No. of widowed females in 10,000 persons, census report 1891

Sylhet	2065.9
Goalpara	1897.1
Kamrup	1730.0
Darrang	1392.1
Nagaon	1272.1
Sibsagar	1213.9
Lakhimpur	1133.1

The census report had reflected certain facts. If we gone through the data than we can see that areas that were close to Bengal had higher more numbers of widows in comparison to the areas lyies in east of Assam. Under the influence of Bengal, areas like Sylhet and Goalpara had strong impact of Brahmanical tradition whereas, towards east of Assam, the Brahmanical tradition could not able to swallow the tribal social structure.

Suggested Reform and Reaction of the Society: In early 20th century a number of writers took widowhood as their theme of writing. Simultaneously two types of writings were found. One who felt pride in showing off the sacrifice of the widow and the other desired some reforms in the life of widows. Penetration of Assamese youth to Bengal for education was the connecting network of Bengal with Assam in terms of social reform movements. 19th century Bengal was swept away by the Brahma Movement started by Raja Rammohan Ray. It was founded in the year 1833. Later on after the death of Raja Rammohan Ray, Brahma Samaj was almost extinct and later on it was revived by Maharshi Debendra Nath Tegore with the name of Adi Brahma Samaj. It was followed by another fraction with the title Brahma Samaj of India in 1866 leaded by Keshab Chandra Sen and in 1878; Sivnath Sastri organized the Sadharon Brahma Samaj. From the time of Brahma Samaj of India, Assam was visited by the members of this organization. But Assamese people come into contact with Brahmaism much earlier than that of late 19th century. As Haliram Dhekial Phukan's brother Jajnaram Kharghoria Phukan was the direct disciple of Rajarammophan Ray but as historian Prof. Rajen Saikia remarks that he found no opportunity to propagate the new faith in Assam¹⁹. The first Brahma person came to Assam for spreading the message of 'New Light' was Sadhu Asharnath and his first disciples from Assam were Padmash Goswami and Gunabhiram Baruah²⁰. The advent of Brahmaism in Assam had influenced the mindset of some newly educated youths. In the pages of *Orunodoi*, person like Hemchandra Baruah, Gunabhiram Baruah wrote in the pseudonym of 'ho.cho' Sonar Chand and "gi.ra" about widow remarriage. The foremost person to support the cause of widows of Assam was Hemchandra Baruah. In his short autobiography of eight pages he

spent two pages to describe his views regarding widow remarriage and early marriage. Widow Remarriage was a long protest movement started by Ishwar Chandra Bidyasagar from Bengal. Hemchandra Baruah at the age of thirty lost his beloved wife after giving birth to a girl child. As a norm of contemporary society of 19th century Assam he could marry for second time but he refused to do that. Being a person from 19th century reactionary Brahmin Society yet he argued that if a widower could marry for second time than why did a widow could not marry after the death of her husband? And if she does so then she will be outcaste from the society²⁰. He gave the reference of Dharmasastras and proved that male and female are though separate entity but both have equal rights. So if a widower could marry a number of time as he wish then why a widow cannot marry!²¹ He lost his wife in 1865. And these kind of liberal thoughts for women were very rare even in Bengal. So, writer Nirupoma Borgohain kept Hemchandra Baruah with Ishwar Chandra Bidyasagar at the same line. She even lamented that a person talking about equal right of women, liberation of women in 19th century was hardly known to the people of Indian and even to the neighboring state of West Bangal²².

In 1856 when the Govt. passed the Widow Remarriage Act 1856, a strong reaction was seen from both the reformist and revivalist section. Gunabhiram Baruah highly appreciated the step taken by Govt. by saying that this decision will make the child born of widow marriage a legal heir of his step father's property²³. Apart from that Gunabhiram Baruah wrote a series of article with the title *Bidhowar Bibah* `marriage of widow` in the journal *Orunodoi*. In those articles he showed the positive outcomes of widow remarriage and gave the information of first ever widow remarriage organized in Bengal, so that Assamese people could also made up their mind to start this activity in Assam too.

But a strong reaction found from Rudraram Bordoloi with the pseudonym of "Ru.Ra". He expressed his suspicion towards widow remarriage in *Orunodoi*. He argued that by giving the bride to the groom, the parents lost every right upon that girl. He then questioned that if her husband dies then how do the parents of the girl can rearrange her marriage as they lost every single right over their daughter at the time of wedlock²⁴. Gunabhiram baruah after reading the reaction of Rudraram Bordoloi instantly on the next issue i.e. November 1857, he wrote part of series of his article *Bidhowar Bibah* eliminate the suspicion of Rudraram Bordoloi. He took help of various *Dharmasastras* to strengthen his point. He agreed that the code for lending material thing and giving a girl into marriage is not the same, as in *sastras* it was written that *Kanyadan* ceremony can be observed even by the brother taking permission from the bride's father and if there was no one close family members there to do the ceremony then it can be performed by any one belonging to the same caste. His point was that if lending material thing and giving a girl into marriage was same than perhaps the shastras won't allow the other people besides the father to perform kanyadan ceremony²⁵. Baruah in fact showed favour not only by his talks but with his deeds. Being a son of a Brahmin family, after the death of his first wife Brajasundori Devi, he married the widow of late Parashuram Baruah in the year 1872 and it was the first

registered marriage of Assam²⁶. The forerunner of Assamese women writer Swarnalata Devi and Barister in Law Jnanadabhiram Baruah were born of this marriage.

Gunabhiram Baruah's most prominent support in written was his famous drama *Ram-Navami*. At the preface of this drama, Gunabhiram Baruah's loved towards his first wife Brajasundari Devi was focused as she desired to see this drama in print. So after her death he lamented as she was not alive when he published it as book. Nevertheless he published it regularly in the journal *Orunodoi*. Gunabhiram Baruah's strong arguments were expressed through the character *Navami* who was a widow but fall in love with a boy named *Ramchandra*. *Navami* spoke out that if a widow cannot marry than how do the male can do the same! The drama *Ram-Navami* showed the mental set up of the young widow who had to suppress her feelings of love, desire to look beautiful by wearing make-up and above all had to suppress her natural biological desire of sex²⁷. A number of strong arguments of Gunabhiram Baruah were put forward as a dialogue of the hero Ramchandra. As huge arguments were there in the society against widow remarriage based on *dharm Sastras*, Gunabhiram Baruah also argued that widow remarriage is there in the *Samhita* and as in the society a number of cases found killing the embryo of the widows to escape from the social defame. Baruah said that, to reduce this kind of heinous crime, widow remarriage is the only solution²⁸.

Another reaction found to the issue of widow remarriage from Lakhmidhar Sharma. As people like Ratneswer Mahanta, Rudraram Bordoloi put a number of questions on the issue of widow marriage, Lakhmidhar Sharma in the pages of *Awahon* and *Chetona* tried hard to give appropriate answer to those to question with reference to *Dharmashastras*. It was been that in the name of '*Brahmacharya*', from very childhood the Assamese girls had been infused the thought of chastity and sacrifice and in that way a terrible life was fixed for them after becoming a widow. After becoming widow, a girl, apart from observing strict social rules and regulation they had to face humiliation and social deformation. In many instances it was found that they were held responsible for her husband's death by her in-laws. For which Lakhmidhar Sharma strongly regretted by saying that Assamese widows were leading a life even worse than an uneducated slave. So he expressed in anxiety that death is far better than leading such a life²⁹. To end up this age old repression of widows he favored widow remarriage but search out two main obstacles to these reform measures i.e. religion and the concept of chastity. In the journal *Assam Hitoishi* in the year 1925 he wrote a long article named *Assomiya Nari Sambondhe Ashar Diyek*, where he put some firm opinions in favor of widow remarriage and told that the concept of chastity is completely male creation and the maintenance of this celibacy, a widow had to suppress her desire³⁰. In many autobiographies some incidents found that the widows were socially defamed and made outcaste when they were found in love with someone and became pregnant. Benudhar Sarmah's autobiography also gave an instance of a widow who became pregnant because of her love with a person. But when the news of pregnancy was disclosed she was thrown out of her village³¹. Nirmolprova Bordoloi in her autobiography also mentioned such tragic incident where the society held responsible only the widow for the pregnancy and awarded

her with some vulgar titles and thrown out of the village³². In both the incidents it was seen that the male counterpart was never brought to the forefront of jurisdiction. The entire blame was given to the women only.

In the journals of Bengal like *Samachar Darpan*, Jagyaram Khargharia Phukon wrote an acknowledgement letter in 1831 thanking British Govt. for abolishing Sati³³. Sati system is closely related with the issue of widowhood but unlike Bengal this system was not that popular in Assam though not totally absent as in Arunodoi an incident of widow immolation found at Sivasagar Keyapur. Later on Jaduram Deka Baruah giving the reference of this incident sarcastically he remarked that if somebody desired to kill a lady in the name of *Sati* is a spiritual and if somebody wants to protect a lady from this than he is accused. Those spiritual people should inflame one of their body parts then they should realize how it feels³⁴.

Jaduram Deka Baruah was a person of mid-19th century and apart from abolition of *Sati*, he supported widow remarriage not only through writings but to give a pace to this reform movement he married a widow and showed to the conservative Assamese society that widow remarriage is not bad³⁵. Though Gunabhiram Baruah, Jaduram Deka Baruah tried to set example of widow remarriage yet the 20th century Assamese society reluctant to accept this reform. Therefore the reformist pontiff of Garmur Satra of Majuli, Sri Pitambar Deva Goswami took up widow remarriage as an important social reform agenda in the early 20th century.

Pitambardeva Goswami has narrated how the contemporary society alleged that Brahmin widows were associated with illicit relationship, and guardians sold them to the foreigners and military men. He noted that, "The pathetic condition of many of the Brahman widow, and the consequent degradation of the society to sinfulness is no longer remaining unknown to people. ... But, no one dares to say that sinful acts like killing of foetus and undergoing abortion is not a kind of social revolution ... Brahmin widows today are being sold to retired sailors (*khalasi*), Chinese carpenters (*china mistry*), tea garden owners (*bagichar sahib*), and even to the coolies (*dhengar kuli*)."³⁶

Advocating the case of widow marriage in the early 20th century, Pitambardeva Goswami stated that as a result of prohibition of widow marriage, not only the young widows had to live a life of deprivation in the family of her parents, but at the same time, such compulsion had led many widows to go astray. Many had adopted abortion in an illegal way, many others got converted to other religions, and still some others were taking their meal with tears in their eyes.³⁷ While sale of widows or their committing infanticide was condemned, no attempt had been made, according to him, by the public to approve currency of widow marriage.³⁸ He further pointed out as to how aged man used to marry minor girls and thus help increase the number of widows.³⁹ In this connection he referred to the *sati* system- a system by which young widows were burnt alive along with their dead husbands creating a scene of atrocity and horror.⁴⁰ Although Pitambardeva Goswami did not mention any case of widow burning in Assam in his time or earlier, it was however not altogether absent in

Assam in the 19th century. A reference that has been already mentioned above in this chapter that a case of widow burning is found in the *Orunodoi* of May, 1846, which stated that on 26th of April that year there was an arrangement for burning of the widow of the elder brother of Lambodar Majumdar of Kalugaon near Sivasagar. But the preparation being reported to the administration, it was finally prevented.⁴¹ According to him, it is illegal on part of the young widows to control the sexuality by force in the name of *brahmacharyya*.⁴² He also pointed out how forceful suppression of sexuality created multifarious diseases among the widows which consequently infected the entire society. If there were provision for widow marriage, such incidents would not have happened.⁴³ He there for disapproved of child marriage and approved widow remarriage. According to him, “for the protection of (Hindu) religion and development of society we must allow widow remarriage.”⁴⁴ Thus, he supported widow remarriage as a means of social growth and development; and, according to him, a person supporting it is a patriot.⁴⁵

Limits of Change: It was seen that on the issue of widow remarriage both the reformist and revivalist thoughts were going on parallel in colonial Assam. Although, in 1856 British government had officially declared widow marriage as legal yet it could not change the attitude of entire people of India as well as Assam towards a widow. Under the influence of Brahma faith, it was seen that a number of people favoured reforms in the life of a widow. Gunabhiram Baruah, the foremost Brahma of Assam was highly inspired by Iswachandra Vidyasagar’s plea for widow remarriage and during his stay in Calcutta as a student, Gunabhiram at the age of 22 got the opportunity to present in historic first widow remarriage ceremony in Calcutta on December 1856 where Srish Chandra Vidyaratna married Kalimati Devi. The marriage was organized by Vidyasagar himself⁴⁶. Those waves of reform movements of Bengal could able to vibrate the young mind of newly educated Gunabhiram Baruah. After returning back to Assam Baruah saw the misery of widows of Assam. Being a person of caste Hindu family he wanted to end up the exploitation of widows in the name of religion and tradition. He wrote in various journals in support of widow marriage along with Hemchandra Baruah.

Finally, Gunabhiram Baruah at the age of 33, after two years of his first wife’s death, married widow Bishnupriya to show his support practically towards widow remarriage. Though Brahmaism started to set in Assam especially in Nagaon, yet practically it could not able to bring change in the mentality of Assamese people. Gunabhiram Baruah after retiring from his job denied settling in Assam though he loved his motherland like anything. He had suspicion in his mind that he won’t get social respect in Assam during his old age due to his stands in support of social reforms like widow remarriage, as a mass of the people of Assam had rigid attitude towards such social reforms⁴⁷. It was seen that only a number of people come into touch with Brahmaism. But though people talked about social reforms yet in real life frequently contradiction were seen in talks and deeds of people. Even in Jorasaku, Thakur Bari this contradiction of talks and deeds had been seen. Father of Robindra Nath Tagore, Maharshi Debendra was the founder of Adi Brahma samaj. Though upliftment of widow remarriage was not a direct agenda of Brahma Samaj but they had their support

towards the plea of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. But it is quite interesting to know that a proposal for Gunabhiram Baruah's daughter Swarnalata's marriage with Robindra Nath Tagore was almost finalized. But on learning about her father's widow remarriage Robindra Nath's father Maharshi Debendra Nath backed out⁴⁸. This incident actually revealed that to what extent those reform movements could be able to transform people's mindset. Later on in 1906 this was covered up by the Tagores when Lotika Devi, the great granddaughter of Debendra Nath Tagore's marriage was observed with Swarnalata's brother barrister Jnanadabhiram Baruah⁴⁹.

In early 20th century the reform movements, western education also could not be able to ease the life of the widows. Even the widows could not be able to take out themselves from the traditional beliefs and restrictions. They willingly accepted those chains of captivity and restriction. Nirmolprava Bordoloi tried hard to feed her widow mother a protein diet with butter and milk, but her mother directly refused to have that though she was very ill⁵⁰. Thus it was seen that the reformist section of the society though talked about reformation in the life of widows yet it did not revolutionize the ideas of men. As a result widows still the mid-20th century did not obtain an honourable status in the patriarchal Assamese mainland society. The problem therefore drew the attention of prominent Assamese women like Chandraprabha Saikiani, who is credited with pioneering the women's movement in Assam during her entire life, she fought for the improvement of the condition of the Assamese women including the Assamese widows. In her short story '*Devi*' published in *Banhi*, May, 1921, she has shown how contact with Gandhian thought particularly on issues like child marriage, child widows joined to her own personal experience of injustice and oppression of women inspired her writing. '*Devi*' is the work of a young inexperienced writer. According to critics, it is the story of a child widow in Gandhian perspective. For, Gandhi had advocated the marriage of virgin (*akshyot Joni*) child widows only. Gandhi and the 19th century reformers had advocated remarriage of such child widows mainly in order to stop their sexual exploitation and the resulting social scandal of illegitimate children, abortion and prostitution.

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22. Nirupoma Borgohain, Nari-Daradi Hemchandra Baruah in *Adhunikotar agradoot Pandit Hemchandra Baruah*, (ed.) Sivnath Barman, Students Stores, Guwahati, p.45-50.
23. Gunabhiram Baruah opined in this way at the Govt`s decision on legalization of widow remarriage in the year 1856. This opinion was published in the journal *Orunodoi* with the heading 'Bidhowa Bibah', Marriage of Hindoo widows legalized.
24. Gunabhiram Baruah, Bidhowar Bibah in *Arunodoi*, p. 220-226.
25. ibid.
26. J Baruah, *Jnadabhiram Baruah Racanavali*, ed. J Bhuyan, ASS, Guwahati, 1981, p159.
27. Gunabhiram Baruah, Ram-Navami in *Derxo Bosoriya Nirbasito Natyo Sankalan*, Assam Natya Sanmilan, Vol-I, p.26.
28. Gunabhiram Baruah, Bidhobar Bibaha, op.cit.
29. Lakhmidhar Sharma, op.cit
30. ibid.
31. Benudhar Sharma, Mojiar Pora Mejoloi in *Benudhar Sharma Racanavali*, ed. J Bhuyan. Pp 135
32. Nirmalprova Bordoloi, op.cit, p.34.
33. Sandhya Devi, Adhunik Jugot Assamiya Nari in *Assamiya Nari Oittijyo aru Uttaran*, ed. Sivanath Barman, Students Stores, Guwahati, 2002, p.26
34. Jaduram Deka Baruah in *Benudhar Sarmah Rasanawali* ed. By J. Bhuyan
35. Sandhya Devi, op.cit.
36. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, op.cit.
37. Cf. ibid

38. *ibid.*
39. *ibid.*
40. *ibid.*
41. *ibid.*
42. *ibid.*
43. *ibid.*
44. *ibid.*
45. *ibid.*
46. Rajen Saikia, *op.cit*, p.206.
47. Jnadabhiram Baruah, *op.cit*, p.159
48. *ibid*,
49. *ibid*, p.160
50. Nirmalprova Bordoloi, *op.cit*, p.280.