

## Social History through the Prism of Family Life

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**Abstract:**-The period from the later part of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century is a crucial phase of Assam history. From the advent of the colonial rule till the growth of the nationalistic aspirations, a new society with indications of modernity was gradually emerging. The emerging Assamese middle-class of that time was capable of adapting themselves to the changing situations. The new professional requirements ushered a change in their life style. Along with the material changes, equally significant was the change of attitude. It was rightly reflected in their personal life and family relations. Account of family life is a notable part of an autobiography. For social history, an autobiography is a valuable site of research as an expression of the world-view of a person or a generation. This paper is an attempt to explore that aspect of social history of Assam primarily from the autobiographies of four memorable lives who were individually and collectively interesting characters and were actively concerned with the issues of this epoch making age.

**Key words:**-Family Life, social history, Assamese middle class, generation conflict, modernity.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the nineteenth century, the Indian society was passing through a period of self-introspection and reform. It is difficult to make an idea of that reality without knowing personal life-histories of those who were part of the process. An autobiography is a useful literature and also a form of historical representation of individual experience. Life writing, historically speaking, is a dependable source of history and historical interpretation. Some prominent Assamese writers with their valuable insights revealed their own life-history as well as the history of their time. This paper is an attempt to look at the different contours of Assamese family life in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries on the basis of four autobiographies penned by Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), Padmanath Gohain Barooah (1871-1946), Benudhar Rajkhowa (1872-1955) and Nalinibala Devi (1898-1977). It will also look into the way the family institution conformed itself to new conditions happening within the wider society. The four authors considered for this study were the foremost literary figures with substantial contribution to Assamese literature and growth of what can be described as cultural nationalism in Assam. Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Mor Jivan Sowaran* (My Recollections) was the first published autobiography in Assam that came out periodically in the *Banhi* from 1922. It was published as a book in 1944. Padmanath Gohain Barooah's autobiography, *Mor Sonwarani* (My Reminiscences) is a revelatory account of his life and the agenda behind his literary and social career. It was published in 1971. *Mor Jivan Dapon* (The Mirror of My Life), the autobiography of Benudhar Rajkhowa inevitably mirrored his experiences as a senior government official under the British as well as inner mind full with social commitment. Written in 1941, it was published in 1969. Nalinibala Devi was one of the earliest women from Assamese society to record life-history. Her autobiography titled *Eri Aha Dinbor* (The Bygone Days) was published in 1976. The making and being of a person is known by his family background. All of these memorable personalities wrote their respective autobiographies starting with their search for family history and childhood memories. They upheld the idea that early life, family atmosphere and training shape one's personality. None of them ignored their roots.

### II. DISCUSSION

Family history illuminates the social context of a family. It is one way of interpreting society with its concerns over kinship ties, marriage arrangements, conjugal relations, parental attitude, gender specific roles, duties and expectations. Discussion on family, its changing pattern and roles find engaging attention among social scientists. Studies on the Indian family endorse the impact of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization on the traditional Indian family system [1]. Different roles and power relations within the family like parent-child, husband-wife and others were never fixed; and transformation came into it in the colonial period which can be studied from historical standpoint. Pierre Bourdieu wrote, 'each family transmits to its children, indirectly, rather than directly, a certain cultural capital and a certain ethos' [2]. Much of the existing literature suggests that family discourse was conditioned by specific cultural traditions. The Assamese family followed similar norms of the Indian social system influenced by some region-specific factors. But, as we know, inherent social inequality is the general rule and, therefore, 'cultural capital' of one family cannot match with that of other. We define it as 'family background'. An autobiography or biography writing is a process of

looking at oneself or the subject with a family background and family values. All the four autobiographies reflect that the authors grew up in family-focused social networks. They narrated the interactions of everyday family life by using expressions like 'we were used to' or 'we always'. Their family affiliation was because of their growth and development. Benudhar Rajkhowa dedicated his autobiography to his family. He clearly mentioned his understanding of the term family as relatives, companions and anyone compassionate to him. Thus his notion of a family was much broader than a single family unit. He rationalised his idea by convincing himself that his involvement in expanding spheres of activities was further extending his family. Benudhar took pride in revealing family relations to the reading public for the fact that his personal life was closely connected with family life. At the end of his autobiography, he appended a separate segment with introductory notes on his spouse and all of his thirteen children. Though there is no statistical data, average Assamese family was a joint one. The identity of a joint family centred on the single kitchen. Padmanath Gohain Barooah reminisced his early childhood in a large family. Three of his maternal uncles lived along with them. He wrote that they were a happy family with around thirty members under a single roof [3]. This was the functioning example of a joint family. Even when the trend towards individualism was coming in, it maintained to be a joint family. It was interpreted as the family in which more than one married sons live with the parents sharing a common habitat, kitchen and labour. This might include a number of married brothers living together with parents or without them, in case they were dead and sharing a common social life and economy [4]. The joint family, on the other hand, had greater generation depth, generally of three or more. Lakshminath Bezbaroa's father Dinanath Bezbaroa (1813-95) was a senior official under the British government but also represented the legacy of the old Assamese aristocracy of the pre-colonial time. He married twice. Lakshminath had much of affection for his step mother. She had been a comforting companion all through his childhood [5]. In depicting his ancestors, Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded that the old Assamese gentry were mostly polygamous. In fact, the one with more number of wives was held in high esteem. But there was perfect understanding among them and, one did not treat the other as adversaries [6]. The autobiographies taken for the present study reflect inter-generational ties. The elders exerted their influence in decision making through moral messages- religious, social, and civic virtue. The grandchildren were closer to their grandparents than with the parents. It was obvious that young Lakshminath's intimacy with some family members influenced his upbringing. Rabinath Bezbaroa who was a distant relation residing with their family, was dear to the children who called him *koka*. Lakshminath fondly remembered him as their supervisor and caretaker. *Rabi koka* gave them company, took them out and also told them stories from the classics [7]. These stories were the inspiration behind the making of story-teller Lakshminath. Sometimes Lakshminath even tried to imitate his lifestyle. The joint-family system was a potent factor in the continuance of cultural tradition. Nalinibala and her younger brother used to sleep with their grandmother who woke up very early in the morning, chanted the *bargeets* and others followed her [8]. The grandmother imparted traditional knowledge to the younger ones. Thus oral tradition passed through generations. While growing up, a child was trained to be worthy of the family lineage. Positive representation of childhood was an important component of all these life writings. It was a 'happy period with overflowing joy and freedom' [9]. In the large extended families, there was a lot of caring and sharing among members who functioned as stakeholders in various capacities. All shouldered their joint responsibilities. Togetherness was a vital feature of joint family system. This system was hailed as one of the major factors in the continuance of cultural traditions in India. Scholars like A.L. Basham (1914-86) believed, In India as long as there is the traditional ideal which expects sons and grandsons to provide for their elders with necessities of life and to care for them in their old age, the joint family system will continue [10]. The present study has the further scope of looking at the family communication. Family leisure and shared experiences promoted family communication. This dimension of family life generated the ability to cope with change in the face of various circumstances. While dealing with the interpersonal relations, it may be useful to look at the model sorted out by A.M. Shah. He specified the descriptions of interpersonal relations in the Indian families in three types: (1) description of the basic roles and relationships in the family, such as husband-wife, father-son, mother-son, father-daughter, mother-daughter, brother-sister, elder brother-younger brother, mother-in-law-daughter-in-law, and so on; (2) description of more general categories (i.e., each subsuming several basic roles and relationships), such as the Hindu widow, the Hindu woman, the aged, the youth, and so on; and (3) description of the general nature of interpersonal relations in the family, particularly of the personality traits and social values fostered in it [11]. In the Assamese society, the father was at the peak of a family with his role as its head. He controlled most of the household things. Higher the social status of a person, the more was his power within the family. Equality was not essentially a family value. Lakshminath Bezbaroa remembered that his father was the undisputed head of the family. Dinanath played the presiding role in the family conversations during the dining hours. There was a special space arrangement in their seating room. The entire family took meals along with his father sitting on the floor of a large room which accommodated around twenty-five. He sat on a large wooden stool, his big plate was placed on another. The utensils for the others were placed on the floor. Young Lakshminath observed that in serious discussions, his father gave the ultimate decision. Traditionally, Indians took their meal sitting on the

floor. The men and children dined first. Dinanath by means of his status and authority was the Bhishma-like father figure. He forbade his sons in using a gun and, therefore, Lakshminath never touched a gun even after long years in a place like Calcutta, long away from his paternal home in Sibsagar [12]. It was due to his heartfelt loyalty to his father. Padmanath Gohain Barooah also mentioned his father's unassailable personality. He noted that not to speak of violating the father's commands, he did not even dare to reason [13]. The dominant social values emphasized the supreme importance of filial piety. A feeling of fear and reverence for the father was commonplace experience in the Assamese family. The high esteem in which the father was held was based on a moral conscience that established relationship between parents and children. The mother was usually kind and pitiful to her children. She was their refuge and had faith on them. There was more communication among women than among men. The mother discussed anything and everything with her daughters but the father did not do so with their sons. A mother was also honoured and revered. Benudhar Rajkhowa observed that his parents were opposite by their nature; his father was tough and mother was soft hearted. Yet Benudhar would call it a perfect match for the reason that if both of them were either very strict or very lenient there would be lack of balance. That situation might lead to hatred [14]. The vision of family life in familistic ideology encompassed life-long marriage, chastity and an intensive parenting ethic that combined strong parental authority, strict discipline, and a warm, expressive style of non-disciplinary interaction [15]. Likewise parents in Assamese society wished to see their children doing well by themselves with whatever knowledge, training, discipline and family values they would instill in them. The duties of the family head were to guard the family, counsel in times of distress and restrict any member from going astray disobeying family norms. Parents had their duty to restrain children from vice and to insist on the path of virtue. They contracted suitable marriage proposal for their children and handed over their inheritance in due time. It was held that the authority of the older generation was a must to maintain moral purity in the society. Family was, however, the immediate site of difference that could also be termed as generation conflict. There was some disagreement between rationalism and parental power in the wider social context. It was a gap between the two generations evident in 'matters related to ideas, taste, behaviour, hopes and aspirations, concept of sin and so on and so forth' [16]. The elite trend of going for modernisation implied their acceptance of the elements of western civilization rejecting the traditional value system. Some of the contemporary autobiographies outlined a silent and passive manifestation of conflict arising out of such attitude in Assamese families. The new professional requirements and attitudes changed the life style of a section of the society. Their food, dress, housing, pattern and living standard everything began to change. They acquired a new taste of life which they never experienced before. But within a family, the parents and their children were not always sensitive to each other's necessity and choice. In many cases, liberal ideas of the sons did not find favour with their conservative fathers. The unexpected happened to the Bezbaroas. Lakshminath wrote that observing the tendencies of his sons, Dinanath announced, 'I would not say anything against your English education. Be whatever you like to, yet I wish to see one of my sons learn our ancient ayurvedic practice. I won't allow him to learn English' (Translation by the present author) [17]. The father was depressed to see none of them willing to respond to his wishes. It was an indication of wearing down his authority. Memoirs since the nineteenth century have documented both the emotional loyalty to parental values and the ideological stance of the younger generation. These differences, however did not lead to disruption of the normal family affairs. The parents had no other way but to accept and the society also gradually accommodated the difference in attitude. In traditional Hindu marriage, the authoritarian joint-family and caste afforded no scope for the recognition of any personal factor, individual aspirations in the relations between husband and wife [18]. However, a husband ought to take care of his wife. A wife was expected to fulfill her obligations not only towards her husband but also to all his relatives skillfully discharging her duties. In the Assamese cultural set up, marriage meant companionship and sharing of responsibilities along with privileges. Benudhar Rajkhowa in his youth, felt the growing need of becoming efficient to cope up with the emotional as well as economic requirement of married life. He was courteous to his wife. He used to entrust her the duty of managing the home. There was mutual faith and respect. Since the nineteenth century, new notions of domesticity and conjugality came to prevail at least among the emerging Indian middle-class. It was primarily seen in a marriage, the living together of husband and wife. Lakshminath's marriage with Prajnasundari Devi in the month of March, 1891 was performed according to the rites of the *Adi Brahma Samaj* in Calcutta. It was certainly shocking news for his parental family at Sibsagar. Lakshminath later came to know about his grief-stricken parents over his decision of marrying a Bengali [19]. Lakshminath and Prajnasundari overcame difficulties of cultural differences. They cherished marital happiness. The idea of self-arranged marriages and the freedom of the spouses to choose their partners on their own was generally, if not entirely, an uncommon practice. The Assamese gentlemen expected to get their women learned in the new abilities of conjugality. Benudhar Rajkhowa published a book entitled, *Lakhimi Tirota* (Ideal Women) in 1909 and dedicated to his wife [20]. He discovered in her the woman of his choice. She was described as a helpmate for her husband, a faithful wife and a mother raising her children with love and care. She taught them to fear God, to be healthy and polite. Women were no longer dominated by men in relationships. The wife was no more a household drudge; she was

her husband's companion with considerable authority in home. She came to be regarded an equal; worthy of respect. Benudhar Rajkhowa's reminiscences of his wife Ratnakumari was in his own words, 'written intentionally not so elaborately' (Translation by the present author). Yet it was in a separate section covering eight pages. Long years of companionship had much to his gratification. He denied the view that charm of husband-wife relationship was a waning thing depending on the ageing of the wife; rather he argued that with ageing, the inner beauty of a wife ought to transcend her physical appearance. Of late, he was experiencing more love and respect for Ratnakumari since ever in their conjugal life [21]. Padmanath Gohain Barooah was thoroughly upset after the sudden death of his 'loving' wife Leelabati. He became reluctant to enjoy worldly happiness. Being sorrowful, he preferred isolation and wrote a long poem named 'Leela' in her memory [22]. Starting from Lakshminath Bezbaroa to Benudhar Rajkhowa, all of them cherished their conjugal lives. It indicates that conjugal happiness and domestic peace were desired things of aspiration for the literate couples. Benudhar Rajkhowa recorded that few attendants were attached to his grandfather as part of his emoluments when he joined the Ahom nobility as the *burhagohain*[23]. Dinanath Bezbaroa's family always kept a few domestic helps residing with them for their day to day house work. Lakshminath remembered that the domestic hands formed integral part of their family. Their family was always kind to them. Lakshminath commented that it was the bond of affection between the household employees and their masters rather than a mechanical relationship based on wages. Once, their servant Ahini's son Dhouram cried out to have the pram of Lakshminath's younger brother Lakshman. When Dinanath came to know about this, he got a special baby carriage built for Dhouram and loved to see the cheerful child [24]. This was perhaps an instance through which Dinanath tried to make his young sons understand that there must not be discrimination in sharing love, care and happiness with the underprivileged. There were maids especially for child rearing. The young ones were taught to be respectful to the elder helpmates. There was warm relation among family members and their domestic helps. They were never treated as slaves. This practice was also a part of the Bengali *bhadralok* culture. The Assamese middle-class was at times imitating their Bengal counterparts. From the early nineteenth century, hiring of servants in the urban Bengali families helped crystallisation of the *bhadralok* culture. The significance of servants and maids in the everyday life was documented by Swapna M. Banerjee. She argues: The attempt to integrate servants within the family and treat them as their own offspring did not eradicate the caste-class distinction and the socio-cultural hierarchy that separated the two groups [25]. During the Ahom rule there was a practice by which some war prisoners and criminals were assigned to the members of the nobility for their personal service. For quite some years, the aristocratic families with the medieval legacy used to have a good number of personal attendants at their disposal. Encounter with the modern values of equality and freedom compelled them to modify the system. Age old practice of keeping servants was discontinued in the initial stage of British rule [26]. In 1843, a regulation ordering the liberation of domestic slaves was passed. The British government's effort in liberating the domestic slaves from the Assamese households was mostly successful. In a few cases, the devoted bondsmen themselves hesitated to go away leaving their kind masters. Lakshminath Bezbaroa called it ties of attachment. In his ancestral household itself, such a couple lived as a family one among them with all of their six daughters. More than that, the Bezbaroa family took the responsibility of arranging marriage for each one of them [27]. There was widespread panic among the erstwhile privileged people. They were afraid to think that in absence of personal caretakers things would go chaos. They were also possibly not willing to part with inclusive and extended nature of the traditional family life. Nalinibala Devi reminisced about her grand ancestral residence in Guwahati. Her grandfather *Ray Bahadur* Madhab Chandra Bardoloi (1847-1907) was holding the post of Sub-Divisional Officer of Barpeta since 1897. He supported almost a total of eighty families. He had a habit of keeping aside some portion from his regular salary for the needy ones. The domestic helps, destitute widows, poor students were among those who stayed there like members of the family. Nalinibala noted that their family had sixteen *bandibeti* or servants in her childhood [28]. Lakshminath Bezbaroa observed a few female members of his family and made a general remark that women after marriage, gradually become quiet and diffident. He gave a sensitive representation of the condition of Assamese Hindu women. There was reference to the widespread polygamy. But at the same time widows including the young ones, were debarred from getting re-married [29]. He had words of appreciation for the talents of his wife. He felt proud to invite to his residence many of his colleagues for the warm hospitality offered by Prajnasundari. She authored and published a book on culinary art, *Amish O Niramish Ranna* (Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Cooking) in 1913. It was received well. It meant that the new Assamese women wanted to know more about tasty and healthy diet, rather than the traditional eating habits. Benudhar Rajkhowa could realise a woman's vulnerability. He seriously thought about the inevitable plight of a Brahmin child widow. He was disturbed to find that re-marriage was prohibited even in distressful situation. He turned critical to Hindu ethics for actually making things unethical. He expected that a woman should be an ornament at home and a jewel in society. He wrote about his wife Ratnakumari in appreciation. She was perfect in doing all her duties in different roles. Benudhar found in her the qualities of a perfect Hindu wife. But he could realize her worth and worldly wisdom only at his later years and, repented for not attending to her earlier suggestions [30].

Social conditioning did not prepare men to be advised by women. Even the few gentlemen employed under the British could rarely make them free from the gender related conventions. Gender bias was rooted in the psyche and parents succumbed to social pressures of having a baby boy as their new born. A crucial observation regarding Padmanath Gohain Barooah's attitude was that after fathering seven daughters at a stretch; he approached to an astrologer praying for a male issue and followed all his recommendations. Padmanath was subsequently blessed with a son. He was thrilled about this experience to the extent that he gave details of it in his autobiography in a chapter entitled 'Fathering a male child' (Translation by the present author). He was aware of the debates around the practice of child marriage and was outwardly opposed to it. But when he found a good match for his daughter, he decided to arrange the marriage of his eldest daughter in her childhood itself. He was possibly unwilling to take chance of getting another eligible groom by the time his daughter attained maturity [31]. Benudhar Rajkhowa also revealed that after having their first child, a daughter, they did not lament as such. His statement itself was suggestive of the general expectation of the time more for a son than for a daughter. However, the autobiography of Nalinibala Devi hardly touched upon this question. Possibly they did not ever feel to be a less preferred child by their parents. The relationship between religion and family cannot be overlooked in this regard. Through the kind of religious participation that the authors remembered from their early childhood helped them to scrutinise the British influenced modern values. Lakshminath Bezbaroa grew up with a commitment to spiritual values. He had his formal initiation into the Brahminical order. During the initiation, he was supposed to chant what he called *mantras* from the *Vedas*. He was unable to make out any meaning but was obedient enough to form a habit of chanting and praying. Wide range of daily activities epitomized the religious fervour of the Bezbaroa family. There were at least three rounds of prayers a day in their family. The children were expected to join their father in the morning prayer. The prayer was followed by *caritatola*, that is reciting of the biographies of the saints. Young boys used to play the accompanying musical instruments with devotional songs. Lakshminath followed a daily habit of wiping off his family temple. He felt privileged because it was believed to be a holy practice and non-Brahmins were, therefore, never allowed to do that in a Brahmin household. Lakshminath also recollected his visit to a number of *satras* in different parts of Assam with his father. The priests of the Kamalabari *satra* were particularly held in high esteem by the Bezbaroa family [32]. All made him interested in the Vaishnavite institutions and the lives of the great saints. In the later stage of his life, Lakshminath came close to the Brahmo Samajists in Calcutta. His views were influenced by the *Brahmo Samaj* through his marriage with the grand-daughter of Debendranath Tagore. Nalinibala Devi's upbringing in an enlightened family shaped her belief system. Her association with an aunt, Mahindri Devi, who returned to reside at their home after years of meditation, had definite influence on her. Coming of a few sages to her place also had a sacred effect on her. She could make her mind strong and could realise her spiritual power through all her interactions with these insightful figures [33]. Following the death of Nalinibala's spouse, her father Nabin Chandra Bardaloi brought her back to Guwahati. He realised that in this emotional crisis, she could find solace in philosophy and accordingly, made arrangement for it. Nalinibala's faith in the Upanishadic thoughts played a supportive role in her activities. The women of that time were thus made to believe that they cannot deny their destiny but can only take up devotion to seek out solace and satisfaction.

### III. CONCLUSION

As a basic social unit, the family provides an opportunity to understand the society at a given point of time. This particular discourse is helpful in understanding the influences that have created the individuals and the social system in general. The joint family system was the average norm of an Assamese family. It had the charm of peaceful living, not the stress of modern life. It was not complicated and people had close ties with their relatives and neighbours. They enjoyed their childhood despite the limited means of amusements. The lives depicted left imprint of cheerful childhood, youthful vigour, authoritative fatherhood, merciful motherhood, comforting friendship and grandmotherly wisdom. Society was respectful to the old, compassionate to the sick, sympathetic to the weak and protective to the young. The institution of family was undergoing transformation and in spite of outward cohesion, it was a site of convergence of tradition and modernity as well as generation conflict. Inherited family training still influenced the day to day activities and beliefs of the emerging Assamese society. The change of outlook towards the women and the underprivileged points to the fact that the Assamese elites were capable of adopting themselves to changing social conditions.

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