

# **The Dynamics of Religions Culture and Gender Roles: Women in Assamese Society**

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India's diverse cultural landscape leads to varying statuses and treatment of women across the nation. When examining women's status in Assam, it is essential to consider the region's rich cultural heritage and diversity. The situation of Assamese women exhibits a multifaceted picture. They have made significant advancements in all areas of modern life. Today's Assamese women are unafraid to express their opinions and actively engage with their communities to combat social issues and injustice. They, at the same time, still face numerous challenges and societal inequities. These challenges are not unique to Assamese women but are common across India, irrespective of their religious affiliations. However, there are areas like marriage and inheritance where religious beliefs continue to have a significant influence on their roles and responsibilities.

**Keywords:** religion, culture, women, Assamese, gender roles

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Culture, a term with multifaceted interpretations, encompasses a collective body of shared knowledge, practices, and understandings that define the identity and social fabric of a community (Geertz, 1973). It also includes accumulated knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, hierarchies, and material possessions transmitted across generations (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Hofstede, 2001). Such a comprehensive definition underscores the diverse and intricate nature of culture.

Women's roles in society, particularly as bearers and transmitters of cultural heritage, are a significant area of study. Cultural norms and practices profoundly shape gender roles, often situating women as key custodians of cultural values (Ortner, 1974; Chakravarti, 2003). Within democratic frameworks, laws and development policies seek to enhance women's status across various sectors (UN Women, 2020). India, being a partner of certain global collaborations such as 'the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women' (CEDAW) since 1993 strives for women's equal rights (United Nations, 1993). Additionally, numerous legal provisions exist to safeguard women's rights within India (National Commission for Women, 2018).

In a 1994 statement to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Indian government acknowledged Indian women's diverse and complex roles (United Nations, 1994). This diversity is particularly evident in Assam, where local cultures and traditions significantly influence women's status and treatment (Menon, 2012).

## **Culture vis-a-vis Religion of Assam and Women: The Prevailing Scenes**

Assam's culture is a tapestry woven from various sub-systems and influences (Bhagabati & Bora, 2001). Historically, Assamese women have been pivotal in

preserving and transmitting cultural values (Sharma, 2013). Ancient texts like the *Katha Guru Charit* highlight women's active participation in socio-economic activities, suggesting a more egalitarian society in ancient Assam (Baruah, 1992). Gait's historical observations also indicate that Assamese women did not face the same social disabilities as women in other parts of India (Lekhuru, 1987).

However, the *Buranjis*, historical chronicles of Assam, reveal a more nuanced picture. Despite their economic contributions, women in Assamese society traditionally had limited influence over property, finance, and domestic matters (Baruah, 1992). The arrival of Vaishnavism and the 'purdah' practice further entrenched patriarchal norms, as evidenced by the adoption of the orani or veil, symbolizing modesty and chastity (Nath, 2011). Scopes in terms of women's education were scarce, as societal norms viewed female education as a threat to male social status (Sharma, 1993).

The British colonial period introduced liberal Western ideas, spurring efforts to improve women's conditions through education and social reform (Sarkar, 2001). Yet, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's access to fundamental social institutions, including education, health, religion, and justice (Pallickal, 2012).

### **Women, Culture, and Patriarchal Norms**

Cultural exclusion of women often stems from biological determinism, one sort of convention that differences in biology validate social and economic inequalities (Chodorow, 1999). This perspective is deeply ingrained in traditional gender conditions and values, influencing women's roles and opportunities in political, legal, economic, and educational spheres (Nussbaum, 2000). For example, puberty rites in Assamese society, like those in Tului Biya (Assamese:  $\text{£} \text{Á}^2 \text{È}$  "  $\text{¿} \neg \text{¿} \beta \frac{3}{4}$  ), meaning "puberty marriage"), emphasize the transition of young girls into roles defined by fertility and motherhood, thereby restricting their personal freedoms and social mobility (Dube, 2008; Goswami, 2012).

Rituals marking menarche, such as those in Assam, Orissa, and Maharashtra, underscore a girl's transition to womanhood and often limit her autonomy by reinforcing her role as a sexual being (Dube, 2008). These rituals, imbued with fertility symbols, impose significant restrictions on menstruating girls, affecting their social and personal freedoms (Das, 2008).

Religious practices also greatly influence in reinforcing gender inequalities. Women are expected to adhere to religious norms that subordinate them to male authority within both household and community contexts (Desai & Krishnaraj, 1990). In Assam, religious spaces such as *Satras*, *Naam Ghars*, and *Mandirs* are predominantly male-dominated, often excluding women or confining them to supportive roles (Sharma, 2013). These practices perpetuate the subordinate status of women, limiting their agency and participation in religious life (Agarwal, 2008).

The paradox of gender and religion is vividly illustrated in the worship of the menstruating Goddess *Kamakhyā*, where the deity's menstruation is celebrated, yet societal views on menstruating women remain stigmatizing (Das, 2008). Religious ethics, often equated with law, enforce hierarchical structures that marginalize women's roles in decision-making within religious institutions (Shikha, 2011).

Despite these challenges, Assamese women navigate and negotiate their roles within traditional norms. They often conform to certain aspects while subtly challenging others, creating spaces for agency and resistance (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kakoti, 2012). For instance, Assamese women's involvement in socio-cultural festivals such as Bihu highlights their crucial role in maintaining and passing down cultural traditions, while also navigating their societal roles (Mahanta, 2013).

The social perception of gender is closely linked to kinship and religion. Additionally, multiple other layers of societal formation shape distinctions in gender (Baruah, 2015).

### Methodology

Taking recourse to such views, a survey has been conducted among different categories of women with the following layers.

- a. Home-makers
- b. Working Men and Working Women
- c. Female students and Male Students

The categories below have been considered in selecting the respondents:

1. They are to be from different age groups and are women and men from various social levels, professions and educational qualifications.
2. The respondents are to be from joint and nuclear families.

### Age Group

The grouping of age is an imperative factor for perceiving someone's social position. As people grow older, they acquire knowledge and experience that shape their behaviors. With age, they gain experience of various kinds. Thus, experiences at different stages of life become a very influencing factor in determining an individual's position in society.

TABLE 1: **Age wise-distribution of respondents**

| <i>Age</i> |       | <i>RESPONDENTS</i> |                 |                   |                 |                   |
|------------|-------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|            |       | Home<br>Makers     | Working<br>Male | Working<br>Female | Male<br>Student | Female<br>Student |
| 1          | 16-25 | 12                 | 9               | 6                 | 49              | 126               |
| 2          | 26-35 | 23                 | 30              | 26                | 27              | 28                |
| 3          | 36-45 | 25                 | 55              | 23                | 3               | 8                 |
| 4          | 46-55 | 16                 | 49              | 23                | 4               | 4                 |
| 5          | 56-65 | 24                 | 22              | 7                 | 1               | 0                 |
|            | Total | 100                | 165             | 85                | 84              | 166               |

From Survey based on Sample

The study reveals that the age group 16-25 years constitutes the largest proportion of respondents, accounting for 33.67% (202 out of 600). This is followed by the 26-35 years group, which comprises 22.33% of the total respondents. Together, these two age groups represent the majority, indicating a younger demographic focus in

the survey. Conversely, the least represented age group is 56-65 years, making up only 9% of the respondents. This distribution may reflect societal trends where younger individuals, particularly students, are more engaged or accessible for such surveys, highlighting their active participation and representation in the data collection process.

### *Sex*

It is well established that sex is a vital indicator in terms of its impact on an individual's thought process. 249 respondents (41.5%) are found male and 351 (58.5%) are found female.

**Table 2:Sex**

| Sl. No. | Sex    | Nos. of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---------|--------|---------------------|----------------|
| 1       | Female | 351                 | 58.5           |
| 2       | Male   | 249                 | 41.5           |
|         | Total  | 600                 | 100            |

### *Formal Education*

Education has a prime role in understanding the advancement of one society. Here the term is used in the context of formal education/instruction in schools, colleges, etc.

**Table 3:Qualification**

| Sl. No. | Educational Qualification       | Nos. of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|---------|---------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| 1.      | Illiterate                      | 16                  | 2.67           |
| 2.      | Upto Primary                    | 52                  | 8.67           |
| 3.      | HSLC                            | 190                 | 31.67          |
| 4.      | HSSLC                           | 140                 | 23.33          |
| 5.      | Graduate                        | 89                  | 14.83          |
| 6.      | Master degree                   | 79                  | 13.17          |
| 7.      | M.Phil.                         | 9                   | 1.5            |
| 8.      | Ph.D.                           | 3                   | 0.5            |
| 9.      | Diploma in Technical programmes | 2                   | 0.33           |
|         | TOTAL                           | 600                 | 100            |

This table shows that a major portion of respondents have completed at least secondary education (HSLC), with 31.67% falling into this category. A significant proportion, 23.33%, have completed higher secondary education (HSSLC). Only a small percentage have advanced degrees (M.Phil. and Ph.D.), indicating a relatively lower level of higher academic achievement among the respondents. The diversity in educational backgrounds provides a broad perspective on various societal issues addressed in the study.

### Occupation

Occupation is another crucial factor in understanding one's way of living in society.

**Table 4: Respondents' Employment**

| Respondents | Answers  | Nos. of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|-------------|----------|---------------------|----------------|
| Male        | Positive | 165                 | 66.27          |
|             | Negative | 84                  | 33.73          |
| Female      | Positive | 85                  | 24.22          |
|             | Negative | 266                 | 75.78          |
| Total       |          | 600                 | 100            |

We see in Table 4 that 66.27% of males are employed while only 33.73% are unemployed. But interestingly 75.78% of females do not have any employment.

### Marital Status

The data gathered indicates that of 351 females in the study, the unmarried female's number is 196. This group comprises 50 working women and 146 women students. Of the 249 male participants, 46 are unmarried students.

### The Mechanism of Religious Culture:

Religion significantly influences individuals' daily lives. As society is fundamentally rooted in religious principles, even non-believers cannot completely detach themselves from religious norms. Consequently, nearly every facet of daily life is shaped by religion (Baruah, 2015). The social customs prevalent in societies are primarily derived from religious teachings. To practice these customs, individuals regularly visit religious institutions such as temples and naam-ghars. Respondents have been questioned whether they visit religious places like naam-ghars and temples (Baruah, 2015).

**Table 5: Is the temple, mandir, or naam-ghar visited by you?**

| Group           | Positive     | Negative    | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 91%          | 9%          | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 16 (19.05%)  | 68 (80.95%) | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 138 (83.13%) | 28 (16.87%) | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 75 (45.45%)  | 90 (54.55%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 75 (88.23%)  | 10 (11.77%) | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 395          | 205         | 600            |

This table shows that homemakers and women students are the most frequent visitors to religious places, with 91% and 83.13% respectively. In contrast, male students are the least likely to visit religious places, with only 19.05% indicating regular attendance. Working men are almost evenly split in their religious attendance while working women show a high level of participation. This suggests a strong adherence to religious practices among women and a more secular approach among male students. Despite their religious affiliations, they are not in a position to capture

a prominent position in religious matters. They are often excluded from significant responsibilities. Consequently, respondents were asked whether they were permitted to go into the prime prayer room of naam-ghar and temple.

**TABLE 6: Is entry to the prime prayer room allowed for you?**

| Groups          | YES       | NO           | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 0         | 100%         | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 0         | 84(100%)     | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 0         | 166(100%)    | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 3 (1.82%) | 162 (98.18%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 0         | 85(100%)     | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 3         | 597          | 600            |

The data presented highlights the restricted participation in key religious areas, such as visiting the main room for prayer. Homemakers are entirely excluded from going into the prayer hall, and this restriction similarly applies to students inclusive of both genders along with working women. For working men, a small fraction (1.82%) is permitted to go into the prayer hall, while the vast majority (98.18%) are not. This indicates that female participation in core religious activities is non-existent. Male participation, on the other hand, is influenced significantly by age, which plays a crucial role in determining involvement in key religious spaces. This sort of participation encompasses not only entry to the prayer room, decision-making roles in the executive patterns of religious institutions are also a part of it. Decision-making authority is crucial as it determines one’s societal position and level of participation in a social process. To understand respondents’ positions in the executive patterns of their institutions, a specific question was posed. (Baruah, 2015)

**TABLE 7: Do you possess a voice in the executive patterns of religious bodies?**

| Groups          | YES        | NO          | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 2%         | 98%         | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 0          | 84(100%)    | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 0          | 166(100%)   | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 24(14.55%) | 141(85.45%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 0          | 85 (100%)   | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 26         | 574         | 600            |

This exhibits that very few respondents, primarily working men, have any role or voice in the governance of religious bodies. Homemakers, students, and working women have almost no representation, indicating a systemic exclusion of these groups from decision-making processes. This data reflects broader societal patterns of gender and role-based power dynamics within religious contexts, where traditional gender roles may limit women’s involvement in institutional governance despite their active

participation in religious practices. Regardless of their involvement in governmental structures, the majority of individuals carry out daily religious rituals at home. These rituals are typically conducted in traditional Assamese households within a designated space known as the puja ghar or thapona. Common practices include morning and evening rituals, such as bathing, lighting ceremonial and earthen lamps, and chanting prayers to honor the deity. Respondents were further questioned whether they engage in these religious activities at home (Baruah, 2015).

**TABLE 8: Do you conduct religious duties in home?**

| Respondents     | YES         | NO          | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 98%         | 2%          | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 16(19.4%)   | 68(80.96%)  | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 161(96.98%) | 5(3.02%)    | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 21(12.72%)  | 144(87.28%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 81(95.29%)  | 4(4.71%)    | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 379         | 221         | 600            |

It is evident from the table that homemakers and female students are the most active in performing religious duties at home, with over 95% participation. In contrast, male students and working men show significantly lower participation in home-based religious activities. This suggests that women, particularly those in traditional roles, maintain and perpetuate religious practices within the household, reinforcing gendered expectations in religious observance. This division of roles reflects broader societal norms where women often bear the responsibility for maintaining religious traditions and rituals within the family context. (Baruah, 2015).

**TABLE 9: Do you perceive that women are rendered with inferior positions in religious patterns?**

| Groups          | Positive     | Negative    | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 91           | 9           | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 76 (90.47%)  | 8(9.53%)    | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 156 (93.97%) | 10(6.03%)   | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 146 (88.48%) | 19 (11.52%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 81 (95.30%)  | 4 (4.70%)   | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 550          | 50          | 600            |

This displays that the overwhelming portion of respondents in all groups consider that women get an inferior status in religious patterns and places. This perception is particularly strong among students and working professionals belonging to the female gender, with over 93% in agreement. The data underscores a widespread consensus on gender inequality within religious spaces, reflecting the lived experiences and observations of the surveyed individuals. These findings highlight persistent societal norms and practices that marginalize women within religious institutions, shaping their roles and opportunities within these contexts. (Baruah, 2015).



**Practices of Custom**

Though there are significant numbers of views to define custom, basically “a custom is a way of behaving or performing certain things that are specific to a particular society, place, or time and which has been accepted by the society traditionally”. (Baruah, 2015). The practices of custom popularly known as traditional practices are those inherited from times immemorial and that are considered as inseparable. Assamese society, by and large, a diverse society, has so many practices of custom. The practices like puberty marriage and constraints imposed on women during menstruation cycles are important to mention in this context. Certain questions have been given to respondents to see women’s condition as a consequence of such practices (Baruah, 2015).

**TABLE 10: Is puberty marriage celebrated in your family or relatives?**

| Groups          | Positive     | Negative   | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 100%         | 0%         | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 82 (97.62%)  | 2 (2.388%) | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 163 (98.20%) | 3 (1.80%)  | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 161 (97.57%) | 4 (2.43%)  | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 82 (96.48%)  | 3 (3.52%)  | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 588          | 12         | 600            |

This indicates that puberty marriage is widely practiced as a ritual among respondents, showing near-universal acceptance across all categories. The near-total participation reflects the deep-rooted nature of this custom within the surveyed community, underscoring its significance as an integral part of social and cultural identity. Despite potential variations in individual beliefs, this practice remains deeply embedded, emphasizing its enduring role in shaping familial and community practices. This widespread acceptance suggests a strong cultural continuity and adherence to traditional norms surrounding marriage and rites of passage within the surveyed population. (Baruah, 2015)

**TABLE 11: Do you consider that such a kind of marriage should be celebrated?**

| Groups          | Positive     | Negative    | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS      | 88%          | 12%         | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS   | 76 (90.47%)  | 8 (9.53%)   | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS | 142 (85.54%) | 24 (14.46%) | 100            |
| WORKING MEN     | 139 (84.24%) | 26 (15.76%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN   | 74 (87.06%)  | 11 (12.94%) | 100            |
| TOTAL           | 519          | 81          | 600            |

This demonstrates that a significant number of respondents of all categories support the practice of puberty rituals. The highest support comes from students



belonging to the male gender and homemakers, indicating strong traditional leanings and cultural continuity within these groups. Although support for puberty marriage is widespread, a small but notable minority opposes this practice, suggesting some level of evolving views within the community. This diversity of opinion underscores ongoing discussions and potential shifts in attitudes towards traditional customs like puberty marriage, reflecting broader societal changes and individual perspectives on cultural practices. (Baruah,2015).

**TABLE 12:Are the dos and don'ts of menstruation practiced by you?**

| Groups             | YES          | NO         | PERCENTAGE (%) |
|--------------------|--------------|------------|----------------|
| HOMEMAKERS         | 92%          | 8%         | 100            |
| MALE STUDENTS      | 80 (95.24%)  | 4 (4.76%)  | 100            |
| FEMALE STUDENTS    | 152 (91.57%) | 14 (8.43%) | 100            |
| WORKING MEN        | 151 (91.51%) | 14 (8.49%) | 100            |
| WORKING WOMEN      | 76 (89.42%)  | 9 (10.58%) | 100            |
| <b>GRAND TOTAL</b> | <b>551</b>   | <b>49</b>  | <b>600</b>     |

This displays that the majority of respondents adhere to traditional dos and don'ts associated with menstruation, reflecting deep-seated cultural and religious beliefs. Male students and homemakers exhibit the highest levels of adherence, likely influenced by their upbringing and societal expectations regarding purity and ritual observances. However, there is a small but significant group, particularly among working women, that does not follow these practices, suggesting a potential shift in attitudes towards menstruation-related customs. This divergence highlights evolving perspectives within the community, where some individuals may question or choose not to adhere strictly to traditional norms, signaling a nuanced approach to cultural practices related to menstruation. (Baruah, 2015).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has delved into the intricate interplay between religious culture and gender roles within the unique socio-cultural landscape of Assamese society. Through a comprehensive exploration of religious beliefs, practices, and their influence on societal norms, we have unearthed the nuanced dynamics that shape and perpetuate gender roles. The findings underscore the profound impact of religious traditions on shaping perceptions of masculinity and femininity, often reinforcing traditional norms and expectations. The data analysis indicates that women in the cultural sphere do not hold equal status with men. Various aspects were examined to understand the connections between culture and women in Assamese society. Gender roles can be both descriptive and prescriptive. The descriptive component, or stereotype, outlines what is typical for each gender in specific contexts and situations, while the prescriptive component dictates what is expected or desirable. In cultures like Assam, where there is a strong emphasis on following religious and traditional norms, this internalized oppression is particularly challenging to overcome. The ingrained adherence to prescribed social behaviors and gender roles often resists rational scrutiny and change. This is evident in Assam, where women have internalized these gender roles within the religious and cultural

context, leading them to accept a subordinate position, as reflected in the statistical data.

Moreover, the study has illuminated the complexities inherent in the negotiation of religious identity and gender roles. The coexistence of diverse religious beliefs within Assamese society has led to a mosaic of cultural influences, contributing to the evolving nature of gender dynamics. It is evident that while certain religious practices may contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, others may offer avenues for subversion and reinterpretation. For instance, the role of folklore and oral traditions in providing alternative narratives to dominant religious doctrines has shown the potential to challenge established gender norms. These alternative narratives often celebrate female divinities and heroines, providing a counterbalance to patriarchal structures.

The paper underscores the importance of recognizing the agency of individuals in navigating the intersection of religious culture and gender roles. It is imperative to acknowledge the diverse ways in which individuals, both men and women, actively engage with and sometimes challenge traditional norms. Women in Assam, for example, have found ways to assert their autonomy and influence within the confines of traditional expectations through participation in religious festivals, community rituals, and local governance. This agency is crucial in understanding how cultural change can occur from within, driven by the very individuals who are often seen as passive recipients of tradition.

Furthermore, the study highlights the need for ongoing dialogue and critical reflection within religious communities, educational institutions, and broader society to foster a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender. Educational reforms that incorporate gender studies and promote critical thinking about religious and cultural traditions are essential. This can help young people in Assam develop a more nuanced understanding of their heritage and how it shapes their perceptions of gender. In addition to educational reforms, the role of media and technology in shaping and challenging gender norms cannot be overlooked. The increasing access to digital platforms has allowed for the proliferation of diverse voices and perspectives, including those that challenge traditional gender roles. Social media campaigns, online forums, and digital storytelling are powerful tools for raising awareness and fostering dialogue about gender equality in Assam.

Moreover, policy interventions that address gender disparities in education, employment, and political representation are vital. Legal frameworks that protect women's rights and promote gender equality must be strengthened and effectively implemented. This includes measures to combat gender-based violence and discrimination, which are often exacerbated by deeply entrenched cultural and religious norms. The intersectionality of gender with other social categories such as caste, class, and ethnicity also deserves attention. In Assamese society, the experiences of women can vary significantly based on these intersecting identities. Therefore, a holistic approach to gender equality must consider these multiple dimensions to effectively address the diverse challenges faced by women in Assam.

In conclusion, the dynamics of religious culture and gender roles in Assamese society are multifaceted and require a nuanced approach for a comprehensive understanding. By continuing to investigate and engage with these complexities, we can contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and pave the way for a

more inclusive and progressive society that respects the diversity of experiences and identities within the cultural and religious tapestry of Assam. The journey towards gender equality in Assam, as in any society, is an ongoing process that requires the collective effort of individuals, communities, and institutions to create meaningful and lasting change.

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