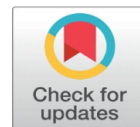


LOCATING THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM THROUGH THE PRISM OF PERFORMATIVE AND VISUAL ARTS



Dr. Diplina Saharia  

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharda University, India



ABSTRACT

In this essay we will make an attempt to see what role performative and visual arts i.e., Vaishnava drama and illustrated manuscript paintings respectively and the biographies of the Vaishnava saints played in reconstructing the gender imagery. We will see how the gender biased representations in both performative and visual arts influenced the role of women in the domestic establishments and the notion of chastity attached to them. At the same time, we will also have a glance at prevalence of polygamy during medieval Assam and how the performative and visual representations justified its prevalence and led to its acceptance.

Keywords: Vaishnava Drama, Illustrated Manuscript Painting, Gender, Visual Images, Chastity

1. INTRODUCTION

The state and religion for the purpose of establishing and propagating themselves may assign different statuses and roles to women. The women were by no means a homogeneous class. They were engaged in different activities at various levels. Some women were engaged in economic activities. Some formed a part of both the skilled and unskilled workforce. Women were into various professional as well as non-professional employments. Sometimes women were employed by the state for different activities and sometimes they worked independently. The grouping and regrouping of women according to the work and activities they were involved in shall help us to reconstruct the place of women in the social and religious sphere.

The household duties of women in the Brahmaputra valley during the medieval period have been precisely summed up by both drama and paintings as serving the husband, cooking food and cleaning and looking after the household. These activities of women were socially assigned to them and were considered as their sacred duties. There were many paintings which beautifully portrayed the household of Nanda in Gokula. In a painting of manuscript *Chitra Bhāgavata* Yashoda was shown doing the household chores. The painting ([Figure 1](#)) depicted three different scenes in the same folio. In the first scene Yashoda was seen churning milk in a pot and Krishna came to her as he was feeling thirsty. In the second scene Yashoda abandoned the churning and picked up Krishna in her lap and breast fed him. A pan above the fire could also be seen near her where the milk was boiling. Yashoda suddenly put Krishna down seeing the milk spilling over from the pan and rushed to remove it. In the third scene Krishna could be seen along

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Corresponding Author

Dr. Diplina Saharia,
ribli diplina@gmail.com

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with a monkey eating the cream from the churning pot and offering some to the monkey as he was angry at being put down and not being fed more milk.



Figure 2 Yashoda doing household works

Source: Dutta, B., H. N. (2013). *Chitra Bhāgavata*. Guwahati: Dutta Barua Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd.

In another painting (Figure 3) of *Chitra Bhāgavata* a morning scene of Gokula was portrayed where the *gopīs* after waking up from the bed cleaned their houses and courtyards, bathed and lit incenses. After that they sat in pairs and started churning the pots filled with milk.



Figure 3 Gopīs doing household works in Gokula

Source: Dutta, B., H. N. (2013). *Chitra Bhāgavata*. Guwahati: Dutta Barua Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd.

The paintings of *Chitra Bhāgavata* further depicted the household scenes where women were engaged in various domestic activities. Yashoda along with other *gopīs* of Gokula was engaged in churning milk, bathing the children, making them eat their food and trying to make them sleep (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Women performing domestic duties

Source: Hazarika, S. (2016). Sachitra Bhakti-Ratnawali of Natun Kamalabari Sattra. Guwahati: Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra.

In the same manner the domestic lives of women were represented beautifully in the drama written by the Vaishnava saints called *Ankīyā Nāṭ* as well. The play *Patnī Prasāda* described the engagement of Brahmin women in cooking while they received the news of the arrival of Krishna. They cooked various aromatic flavored rice dishes, rice cakes, rice cooked in milk and sugar and also cooked various other eatables in six tastes viz. sweet, bitter, pungent, astringent, acid, and salt. In most of the plays Yashoda and other *gopīs* were portrayed in a manner where they were mostly occupied with their families and household works. The medieval Assamese society was a rural and agrarian society where the household works of women comprised primarily of cooking food, washing utensils, sweeping, dusting and milking cows similar to the women in other parts of the country.

Another play *Bhūmi-Lutiā* mentioned that the *gopāla* or cowherds brought the milk home and then the *gopīs* or the cowherd-women churned the milk and prepared butter and rice balls with sugar, milk and *karpūr* and various other milk-based sweets. Apart from cooking, there was also mention of different activities related to child rearing viz. bathing the children, changing clothes, making them eat and teaching them disciplines and also cleaning of the house. The role of women taking care of their home was showed in the play *Arjuna Bhañjana* where Yashoda scolded Nanda and said that he did not have any right over the household matters as she was the housewife and she did all the domestic works right from the cooking of food to raising the child and looking after the house and therefore she had all the rights

over domestic matters and Nanda should eat whatever she gave to him and he should keep himself busy in his own work. This implies that with regard to the control over the resources of the household, women were supposed to manage the household on behalf of their husbands. As Yashoda said Nanda should concentrate on grazing and milking the cows and bringing the milk and that he ought not to have any say and control over the domestic matters, it suggests that the wives enjoyed some amount of autonomy in the utilization of domestic resources and spending and budgeting of the household.

The familial roles of women were not valorised, and their domestic labour was never translated into economic terms. The majority of the women were supposed to undertake various kinds of household duties viz. cleaning the house, cooking food, raising, and taking care of children and looking after the house. While discussing the social and economic status of women, Kumkum Roy in *Women in Early Indian Societies* said that 'women whose social status was legitimate, did not have equivalent legitimate access to an independent economic status, whereas women whose socio-sexual status are ambivalent at best, were more easily recognized as independent actors'. However, there were women who undertook economic activities through the household and outside the household. There was a class of women who engaged themselves in a varied range of productive activities within the domain of the household.

Chastity was recognized as one of the most essential aspects of a woman's character and medieval Assam was no different. In the patriarchal society to be a *patibratā* or chaste wife was considered as the specific *dharma* or ideology of a Hindu wife. The plays written by the Vaishnava saints frequently mentioned chaste wives who were submissive and devoted to her husbands. If we analyse the content of these plays the women were given a subordinate position compared to their male counterparts. The plays portrayed the woman as chaste, submissive, faithful but dependent wives. In the play *Rukminī Harana* female characters were shown as very weak and dependent on their husbands. In the play *Rukminī Harana* the leading female Goddess Rukmini was depicted as *patibratā* where she was pining for her chosen husband Krishna when she was forced by her parents and brother to get married to Shisupala. Later Krishna came and saved her from this situation. Here the author tried to paint a picture of a chaste woman by portraying even the Goddess as weak, submissive, and dependent on male power. He introduced Rukmini as a traditional lovelorn woman who saw her beloved as the lord and master. She swooned, cried, blushed, and displayed all conventional womanly characteristics. Krishna's longing for Rukmini is stated but not as vividly described and stressed upon as Rukmini's, being a loyal, devoted, and chaste woman. The character of Sita in the play *Rāma Vijaya* was portrayed in the same way as that of Rukmini in *Rukminī Harana*.

The biographies of Vaishnava saints provided several examples of *patibratā* women who aspired to be ideal wives and also symbols of fidelity. The Vaishnava movement had put forward several restrictions as far as women were concerned viz. women could not laugh loudly, could not talk to any male members other than her close relatives, could not show their bare limbs and any women who dared to break these conducts were declared unchaste and inauspicious. Sankardeva stated that women must be devoted towards their husbands, and it was considered as the utmost duty of a wife. Another Vaishnava saint Madhabdeva even advised Sankardeva's wife to address her husband as *Gosāin* or God.

There were several depictions of chaste wives in *Kathā Guru Carit*. The wife of Vaishnava saint Harihara Āta was considered a chaste and *patibratā* woman.

Harihara Āta was a disciple of Madhabdeva and an ardent follower of Vaishnavism. *Guru Carit Kathā* said that Harihara Āta rejected the marriage proposals from the girls who were too beautiful. The *Carit Puthi* mentioned that it was because he considered beautiful women as the cause of problem and destruction. When he finally got married, he imposed three restrictions on his wife, that she must not expose her feet before anybody; she must not see any other male members and she should not take food in other houses. However, the *Carit Puthi* narrated that the young wife of Harihara Āta broke the conditions imposed on her by lifting her *mékhlā* to the knees while crossing a stream of water; eating food at the house of her uncle and she looked into a marriage procession from inside her house. Due to this the marriage of Harihara Āta was about to break. However, the young wife considered her marriage so important that she insisted him to keep her as his slave (*dāsī*) as she considered herself as such in this world and the world hereafter. On her request Harihara Āta kept her as a slave, and she was to stay in a solitary shade made outside his house. *Guru Carit Kathā* further narrated that she was given another condition where she had to husk the rice by her own hands, and she had to maintain her living on whatever amount of grains she could collect. There were other references in *Kātha Guru Carit* where emphasis was laid on the chastity of women. It narrated an event where we found mention of a woman named Radhika or Jogamaya, a wife of a fisherman who belonged to the Kaivarta caste. According to the *Carit Puthis* she led a very chaste life and was known for her devotion and fidelity to her husband, and she maintained strictly a veil over her face. Her chastity has been explained by stating an event where Sankardeva, the founder of Vaishnavism in Assam, along with other members of the society were trying to construct a dam on the river Tembuwani in Nagaon which failed again and again. Sankardeva then said that if a chaste woman would carry water in a *pāla* (a fishing instrument made of bamboo having many big holes) from the river and splash it on the dam, then only the dam could be successfully built. Radhika brought water from the river in a *pāla* and poured the water at the spot where the construction work was going on but at the same time the wives of the Brahmins present at the site failed to carry the water. Thus, it can be seen from the above that the great emphasis laid on chastity of women by the Vaishnava saints reflected their patriarchal mindset. The importance of being *patibratā* or an ideal and devoted wife, which was initially confined only to the upper caste women, was gradually being extended even to the women of lower castes. They prescribed strict rules on how a woman should conduct herself in society. Even the women tried to keep their chastity untarnished. It had been recorded that Sankardeva's daughter-in-law and Kamalalochana's wife, who was extremely beautiful, disfigured her face by removing her teeth with a stone because she wanted to save her chastity from the Koch king Raghudeva. These instances pointed towards the importance laid on chastity of women belonging to any strata of the society.

However, though great importance was laid on chastity of women, as far as men is concerned polygamy was common practice. The Vaishnava plays gave several instances of existence of polygamy. In the play *Pārijāt Harana*, the practice of polygamy was stated while narrating different events. The story of the play revolves around the *pārijāt* flower. One day sage Narada, the king of Gods, Indra, and his wife Sachi came to Dwarka to meet Krishna. Narada presented a *pārijāt* flower to Krishna and started explaining the qualities it possessed. Rukmini, the wife of Krishna who was also present there with the later, asked Krishna for that flower. Krishna immediately made her wear the *pārijāt* flower. When sage Narada informed Satyabhama, another wife of Krishna, about the *pārijāt* flower being given to Rukmini, she got jealous. Satyabhama was displayed possessing stereotypical womanly traits such as jealousy and envy for her co-wife which suggested the

prevalence of polygamy. In the same play Indra sought Krishna's help to save them from Narakasura, a demon from Pragjyotisha. Indra further requested him to rescue the maidens whom Narakasura had forcefully taken and also the *kundal* (earrings) of the mother of Gods Aditi and Varuna's umbrella. Krishna assured them and sent them back to Amravati. Krishna and Satyabhama then left for Pragjyotisha where Krishna defeated Narakasura and rescued the maidens, Aditi's *kundal* and Varuna's umbrella. In the *Purāṇas* it was mentioned that the 16,000 maidens were in possession of Narakasura in his *harem* in Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa who were later on recovered and married by Krishna. The portrayal of Satyabhama's hatred for her co-wife Rukmini was an important aspect of this play as it showed the acceptance of polygamy in the society. There was also mention of the existence of co-wives in the play *Rukminī Harana*. Moreover, it also showed that there was no bar on the number of wives a man may have which indicated the existence of polygamy. It pointed to the fact that the practice of polygamy in the society was very much acceptable even to the 'reformative' Vaishnava movement of Assam.

It appears that polygamy was widely practiced in the medieval Assamese society by the members of the royal family, the nobles, the Vaishnava saints and even by the common people. Shehabuddin Talesh, who came to Assam with Mir Jumla during the Mughal-Ahom war, wrote that 'few of the men have two wives only, most have four or five'. There existed another instance in the Ahom kingdom which showed that the position of co-wives was extremely miserable and that the neglected co-wife in this case tried to kill her rival co-wife. The queen regent of Ahom king Tao Khamti (1380-1389) was a barren and jealous co-wife. The queen regent was given the charge of the state by the king when he went for an expedition against the Chutiyas. The queen took advantage of the power and sentenced her co-wife, who was an expectant mother, to death on charge of an alleged adultery. But the soldiers who were to carry out her order secretly spared her life by setting her adrift on the river. Later she got shelter in the house of a Brahmin from Habung and delivered a son who later became the king called Sudangpha or Bamuni Konwar (1397-1407).

The founder of the Ahom kingdom, Sukapha, married four maidens from the Barahi and Moran tribes. Another Ahom king Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) had twenty-four wives. The Kamata king Nilambar had eight wives. Polygamy was not only confined to the royal families and nobles. There were instances of polygamy even among the common people like the Moamariya rebels and Vaishnava saints. During the Moamariya uprising when the Ahom capital was occupied by the Moamariyas, one Moamariya rebel leader named Raghav Barbarua forcibly took Kuranganayani, the wife of Ahom king Rajeswar Singha, as his wife. He even said that he would take one hundred wives and he brought in the queen Kuranganayani as well the daughters of the Phukans and the Baruas. The Vaishnava movement too was in favour of polygamy. The grandson of Sankardeva, Chaturbhuj Thakur, had three wives. Purushuttam Thakur, Sankardeva's great grandson, after his wife Rebati died, married two girls Lakshmipriya and Rukmini. The founder of the subsect Kala *samhati*, Gopaladeva of Bhabanipur, also had four wives. Thus, it can be seen that polygamy was widely practiced in medieval Assam and even the Vaishnava movement and the preachers accepted and practiced it. It was widely prevalent among the royal class as well.

2. CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper throws light on how the conceptualisation of the various roles of women was influenced by their depiction in the performative and visual arts. An overarching theme of these representations was the placing of women in a position

submissive to and dependent on their male counterparts. Even Goddesses were presented in the same manner and these aspects in turn led to the normalisation of an inferior position of women to men in the society at large. However, while discussing various dynamics of women and the roles they played in different sectors few important aspects came to light. There was no mention of wages or income of the women who were involved in various activities viz. domestic female attendants, women working in the royal palaces, female slaves etc. The female slaves were referred several times in the sources. However, apart from stating the general modes, there was little discussion on how and from where female slaves were acquired. The status of the female slaves and female attendants in the society and what happened to them once they reached old age was not mentioned in the sources. There were several depictions of chaste wives in most of the performative and visual arts. Thus, it appears that great importance was laid on chastity of women's

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