

Negotiating Gendered Spaces: Social Discrimination in Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Jivanar Batat*

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Abstract

Gendered space is one of the most controversial issues at present. It encompasses social inequality, particularly within patriarchal societies where social institutions, customs, and cultural practices often assign unequal roles, rights, and opportunities to men and women. Literature provides an important space for examining these structures. Birinchi Kumar Barua's Jivanar Batat, an important Assamese novel of the twentieth century, offers a significant representation of Assamese society during a period of transition between tradition and modernity. Through characters such as Tagar, Aideo, Suprabha, Bhuga Dutta, Bapuram Bora, Dharani, Kamalakanta, Sunad, and Kadu, the novel exposes several manifestations of gender inequality, including unequal educational opportunities, patriarchal control over marriage, denial of women's consent, caste-based discrimination, sexual harassment, gendered division of labour, and economic marginalisation.

This article examines these representations through a feminist critical framework, drawing particularly upon the concepts of patriarchy, gender as a social construction, and the intersection of gender with class and caste. The study argues that Jivanar Batat does not merely portray women as victims of social oppression; it also reveals their endurance, moral agency, and capacity to negotiate restrictive social structures. The paper therefore contends that Barua's novel can be read as an important literary critique of gendered social structures in Assamese society.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Assamese Literature, Tagar, Caste, Class, Women, Social Inequality

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Introduction

Gender is a social and cultural system through which societies define appropriate behaviour, responsibilities, privileges, and limitations for men and women. In patriarchal societies, gender becomes particularly important because social institutions often distribute power unequally between the sexes. Domestic violence in same-sex relationships is still a rarely spoken-about phenomenon that occurs far too often (Tully 85). As a result, education, property, marriage, employment, family authority, and public participation may become gendered spaces in which men enjoy greater freedom, and women are expected to remain within prescribed boundaries. Literature is an important medium for examining such social structures. Birinchi Kumar Barua occupies an important position in modern Assamese literature. *Jivanar Batat* (1944) is widely recognised as a unique novel of modern Assamese literature. The novel depicts everyday social life and presents characters whose experiences are shaped by family, caste, gender, education, economic circumstances, and changing political consciousness.

The majority of women were victims of childhood abuse and/or witnessed violence between their parents. Most reported feeling cut off from their mothers, left their childhood homes before the age of 18, and experienced violence at the hands of a prior partner. (Seamans et al. 52)

The novel's representation of women in *Jivanar Batat* deserves particular attention. The novel portrays a social world where women are expected to fulfil domestic responsibilities, while men have greater access to education, public life, employment, and decision-making. Women's marriages are frequently treated as family arrangements rather than personal choices. The experiences of Tagar and other female characters like Suprabha, Aideo, etc., reveal the consequences of such a system. The present study also examines this through the lens of gender stereotypes. It focuses particularly on the ways in which patriarchal ideology operates through family, marriage, education, custom, caste, labour, and economic relations. It also considers whether women in the novel remain merely passive victims or demonstrate resistance and agency within restrictive circumstances.

Review of Literature

Scholars, critics, and other writers have examined Birinchi Kumar Barua's novels. Dr Hiren Gohain published an article in the magazine *Prakash* in 1982. He highlights the feminist perspective of the novel *Jivanar Batat*. In *Jivanar Batat*, Tagar does not protest but endures all the injustice and abuse in her life. Satyendra Nath Sarma, in his book 'Asamiya Upanyasar Gatidhara' (2010), highlights the miserable picture of women, which the novel *Jivanar Batat* expresses clearly. This book reveals men's dominance over women, particularly in the context of patriarchal society.

Objectives and aim of the Study

This study aims to examine gender discrimination in *Jivanar Batat*, analyse how patriarchy operates within the family and society portrayed in the novel, and

explore the relationship between gender, caste, and class.

Methodology of the Study

The research uses a qualitative approach based on close reading of *Jivanar Batat* as the primary text. It analyses the novel's characters, dialogue, and social setting to examine gender discrimination. Feminist criticism guides the discussion of patriarchal authority and gender roles, while postcolonial theory informs its consideration of the wider social context. Reference books and literary criticism serve as secondary sources.

Analysis and Discussion

The study examines gender and social discrimination through the characters, setting, and plot. At the beginning of the novel '*Jivanar Batat*,' Bhuga Dutta, the Mouzadar of Marangi mouza, organises his daughter Aideo's marriage. He instructs all the relatives and other villagers to perform their duties as he assigns the pre-planned work. Tagar and her friends regularly come and start cutting betel nut, which they need to invite the guests. His authority over the arrangements demonstrates the patriarch's central position within the household. The father appears as the legitimate decision-maker regarding the daughter's future, while women largely participate within prescribed domestic roles. It clarifies that the family is one of the most important institutions through which patriarchy operates in society. The patriarchal family system has given men more empowerment than women since long ago. Historically, men have obtained more economic profit, education, and social status than women. In every era, women are dominated by men in every sector of life. In the novel *Jivanar Bato*, the researcher portrays these aspects through characters such as Krishna Dutta, Kamalakanta, Aideo, Tagar, and Suprabha. Krishna Dutta and Kamalakanta can pursue higher education in Guwahati, but Aideo, Tagar, and Suprabha cannot. Instead of promoting empowerment, their parents arranged their marriage as early as possible. The social status of Hindu families is not up to the mark because they are literally dependent on their father.

For example, Bapuram Bora fixed Tagar's marriage without her consent. In terms of modern education, rural and urban people do not support their younger girls in pursuing higher education, but they support boys only. Women are not given priority in terms of education because they cannot take care of their own parents after their marriage. Traditional society passes this idea down from generation to generation. In the novel, Bhuga Dutta supports and prioritises his son's higher education. On the other hand, he does not show equal interest in his daughter's higher education. Instead of providing higher education to their daughters, the parents want their daughters to learn household work well. It is a fine example of discrimination which is based on the patriarchal system. Because of old ideas, parents generally do not want their girls to pursue higher education. "Discrimination is intrusive and stressful, and may exacerbate the extent to which chronic pain interferes with life" (Boring and Mathur 1).

In Assamese society, girls are married off and expected to live permanently in a new home. They won't get the opportunity to serve their own parents. That is why parents don't willingly let their own girls study more. The study again highlights the same mentality of rich people. Raibahadur Manik Hazarika belongs to a rich family, and they live in Dibrugarh town. The following dialogue of the wife of Raibahadur Manik Hazarika suggests partiality:

Baruwani asked, What class does Aideo study in?

Mrs Hazarika replies, 'She will appear in the Matric Examination next year, perhaps. We don't think she will study more after appearing for the examination. Father wishes her to study in college. Does our girl need to study in college to earn money? She should learn and understand the household works well, what do you say? (Barua 46)

Similarly, Mouzadarwani is Bhuga Dutta's wife, and they also belong to a middle-class family. Mouzadarwani's following conversation implies this discrepancy: "Mouzadarwani says to Kamakanta, What is the profit of educating a girl too much? If she learns the household chores properly, that should be enough. What do you say, isn't that so?" (Barua 22).

Some outdated traditions and customs of Assamese society are also responsible for making women a neglected or marginalised class, which conveys the paradigm of disparity. In *Jivanar Batat*, the novelist opens with a marriage ceremony in which Miss Aideo observes a three-day fast before her marriage, a custom in Assamese society. Besides, newly married women in the Assamese community strictly observe the purdah system. In the novel, Tagar comes to Dharani's home as a bride or sister-in-law, and she has to familiarise herself with their relatives by kneeling before them. She does so, covering her head with her shawl at her mother-in-law's direction. Tagar's behaviour as a bride is carefully regulated. She must cover her head, demonstrate respect before relatives, and perform socially prescribed forms of submission. Women must abide by these customs strictly, but men do not observe them as closely, creating a discrepancy between the sexes. The study focuses on the role of patriarchal society and class-like women. The following dialogue of Tagar displays her as a victim of discrimination:

Covering her eyes in embarrassment and weeping quietly, Tagar asked, Why have you brought ruin upon me?

Kmalakanta felt ill at ease. Fear and apprehension shook him now. He asked, Your ruin.

How will I show my face to people? Tagar asked, still weeping. (Barua 24)

After Kamalakanta and Tagar's marriage is cancelled, Bapuram Bora makes a strict decision that sets Tagar's life on a new path. Without her consent, Bapuram Bora arranged her marriage to Dharani master. This action of her father indicates the social value and status of women in the orthodox family and many other dimensions of gender bias. "Child marriage, deeply rooted in ancient customs,

persists in Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan regions. Despite its prevalence, a systematic review addressing this practice's multifaceted nature is lacking" (Valan et al. 8).

The following speech between Bapuram Bora and Dharani implies the various notions of gender discrimination:

But without asking Tagar. Unconsciously, it has come out of Dharani's mouth. There is still no custom in our society of taking her opinion when marrying a girl. I don't see any reason for Tagar to object.

Kamalakanta too -

Realising the real fear of Dharani, he eagerly replies, you must be sure of that. I will give Tagar to you when I have agreed. I shall arrange the marriage definitely within the month of Aghun. (Barua 54)

After marrying Dharani, Tagar faces the challenges of marital life. First of all, Tagar has to endure the derogatory remarks about low caste spoken by the relatives of Dharani. This leads to the terrible condition which society constructs, with concepts like high and low caste, race, community, etc., and common people accordingly behave. Tagar realises her own situation and accepts the challenges. She does not protest against them in the novel, but she sometimes questions them in her mind and blames her fate. Casteism plays an important role in terms of the marriage ceremony, particularly in Assamese society. This is a major issue in Assamese society, which Dr Barua criticises well in the novel. The marriage between high-caste and low-caste people is not fixed or arranged by the concerned community. In the novel, Dharani belongs to the high caste, and Tagar belongs to the low caste. Dharani's relatives do not morally accept Dharani and Tagar's marriage. The following speech of the character Sunad not only reveals the discrepancy of caste but also dominance over women as a marginalised class:

He said, smiling in a tone of insult, 'Oh, I'll believe you if you tell me, won't I? How many Kalita-Kayashta houses are there in upper? I have at my fingertips. 'Your son has not done the job well. The punishment will be imposed on you along with your son by the society'. (Barua 59)

The character Sunad again stands for the power of patriarchal society. His cunning and dominant behaviour is clearly displayed through his dialogues. Such a man is available in our society who always tries to show his manly temperament over women as a marginalised class. The following speeches of Ahini highlight it:

Dharani's mother's chest tore with the fear of the future. Ahini knows the cunning Sunad well. Sunad is the forefront of searching the defamation of the village women. She understands well how Sunad will harass by drowning and inciting her son's marriage in the society. (Barua 59)

The researcher also portrays a character named Kadu, who is skilled at chatting with the village spinsters and sisters-in-law. He is presented as a characterless person who also stands for dominance over women under the impact

of the patriarchal system. The following speech between Kadu and Tagar reflects these notions explicitly:

Advancing step by step, Kadu asks to get her mind, 'You have been seen beautiful today. There is no woman shaped like you in this area. . .

Kadu has kept his eye on Tagar for a long time. His longing is unconsciously exposed today, at a suitable, perfect time. Being encouraged by the reply of Tagar, he asks shamelessly, 'I will come tomorrow at night then.

Tagar herself could not notice that Kadu will take her words in this way. The sieve which was spinning fell off from Tagar's hand in obscene question. Don't come to chat with me in this evening, she said, standing up like a spring doll. (Barua 145)

The division of labour is a crucial gender issue rooted in social, cultural, and economic structures. Society constructs the rules and responsibilities which are allocated between men and women, reflecting gender roles. Both men and women perform these gender-based tasks from one generation to the next. These gender-based roles and notions are strictly opposed and protested by modern educated women all over the world in the contemporary scenario. In *Jivanar Batat*, the novelist aptly highlights this gendered division of labour. At the very beginning of the novel, Mouzader Bhuga Dutta arranges a marriage ceremony for his younger daughter in his own village. "Sexual harassment as an interaction was also reflected in how some participants reasoned around sexual harassment as requiring an event to be repeated, and an exchange to occur between perpetrator and victim to establish limits and be clear about when a boundary has been crossed" (Palmieri et al. 8). A human rights violation, child marriage among women, is not an uncommon practice and has continued for centuries in India. Whatever its origin, the reason for its persistence is an issue that needs to be re-looked (Sen et al. 25). People in the rural area generally come to help with household work. Men here do hard work like building a temporary pandal, while women do lighter duties like cutting betel nut and preparing snacks. Later in the novel, Dharani master steps out to engage in social service, while his wife, Tagar, remains involved in household work. Besides, Dharani becomes involved in social and political activity, particularly in the freedom movement, while Tagar remains responsible for the household.

Despite severe trauma, women are reluctant to walk out of the marriage because of deeply ingrained cultural values that regard the institution of marriage as sacred. Lack of income security, fear of losing custody of the children, poor support from the natal family, and increased risk of vulnerability in being single (separated or divorced) are additional concerns (Inman and Rao 85).

Women play an important role in class formation, a notable gender issue. Women generally work in secondary jobs. Such secondary jobs provide low income and limited job security. Thus, women have not gained a high position in a class-divided society and labour market. Later in the novel, the novelist presents Tagar, the heroine, as a mistress in the Sipini Sangha, where she earns a low income. Tagar

has a bitter experience with dominant rich people when the police administration falsely blames her as a thief, and it takes place due to her poor family and class formation of gender. The following speech between Madhob Mahanta and Kamalakanta conveys the tyrannical nature of rich people upon the class:

I just searched the house of the master of the Sipini Sangha. One good thing came out there. Don't be afraid, the rest will be found. Apart from the ring and money, have they stolen any of your clothes? A few pairs of Riha-Mekhela of Eri and Muga silk have been found in the house of the mistress. . . (Barua 212)

Findings

Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Jivanar Bataat* provides a valuable literary representation of gender relations within a changing Assamese society. Through the experiences of Tagar, Aideo, Suprabha, and other female characters, the novel exposes the limitations imposed upon women by patriarchal family structures, unequal educational opportunities, marriage practices, social customs, caste hierarchy, sexual harassment, gendered labour, and economic inequality. The novel's representation of gender discrimination is especially significant because oppression is presented as part of everyday social life. Women are not necessarily oppressed through spectacular acts of violence alone. Their marginalisation also stems from ordinary expectations: girls should learn household work rather than pursue higher education; fathers should arrange their daughters' marriages; wives should prioritise domestic responsibilities; women should preserve family honour; and women from socially disadvantaged backgrounds should accept their subordinate position. Tagar's character makes the novel particularly powerful from a feminist perspective. She experiences several overlapping forms of oppression, yet she also demonstrates resilience and responsibility. Her life reveals the contradictions of a patriarchal society in which women are denied autonomy but simultaneously expected to carry enormous emotional, domestic, and economic responsibilities.

Conclusion

Jivanar Bataat shows that gender is inseparable from questions of education, family, caste, class, labour, and social power. The novel remains valuable for contemporary literary scholarship because it lets readers examine how traditional structures shape women's lives and how women negotiate, endure, and sometimes resist them. Through the character Tagar, the novel suggests that understanding the history of social change requires examining women's often-unrecognised experiences and labour.

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