A STUDY ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF SPinstERS IN ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GUWAHATI CITY

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ABSTRACT

In Indian culture, being single through the middle and the old age is regarded as a social problem. Single women fall into three categories, Spinster, those who have not married, widows, those who have lost their husbands and divorced women, those whose husbands have left them alone. In all these categories, women are usually found in trouble. A spinster or an unmarried woman is not simply a single woman, but a woman who has not formed a human pair bond. In Indian society, marriage is considered not as a necessity, but also as a social and religious duty. Vedic literature describes an unmarried person as unholy and incomplete. Marriage is a form of purification, therefore, occupies an important place in a women’s life. Thus, in an Assamese society, being unmarried becomes a challenging situation for women. This paper has attempted to focus on the category of never married women in the age group of 45 and above. The data for the study is primarily based on the experiences of forty unmarried women residing in the Guwahati city. Each woman share their experiences and reflections of their life. The main objective of this paper is to observe the socio-economic background of spinsters or unmarried women and their perception towards life.

Keywords: Spinster; Single Women; Social-problem; Marriage

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a major ‘social institution’, which is being attached with almost every individual as an obligation and an unavoidable event in an individual’s life. It is traditionally being destined by the society to every woman. With a position of sub-ordination, women basically depends on her father before marriage, shifts her dependency on her husband after tying up the knot and later depends on her son if any as being viewed in common parlance. Although in recent period with positivistic attitude, a section of women are seen to be no longer dependent as a burden on men as a result of their entry in the world of occupation. Tag of marriage is the way to improve the status of women in a country like India. Marriage among Hindus is considered like a sacrament performed by both the husband and wife. Among the Muslims, marriage is concerned with the fulfillment of sexual desires and for long life partnership among the Christians as the basic aims of marriage respectively, every women is forced to step on the threshold of marriage. Life without marriage evokes a social ‘stigma’ among the unmarried women. “For girls marriage is the only means of integration in the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are socially viewed, so much wastage.” (De Beauvoir, 1997). Much of the stigma attached to Spinster is a direct occurrence of one of the dominant forces family and its ‘socialization’ processes assuming to be the vital element of the social structure. Family and the socialization processes recognized to be the backbone of an individual, supports her to integrate into the community at large and develop a personality of self. “Without socialization, an individual would bear little resemblance to any human being defined as normal by the standards of the society.” (Haralombas, Herald, 2009).
In order to understand spinsterhood as a gender trouble, it is important to understand the terminology of Spinster. A spinster or an old maid is an older woman who has never been married. For women to be identified as a spinster, the age is critical. “A ‘Spinster’ is not simply a ‘single woman’ but a woman who has not formed a human pair bond by the time she is approaching or has reached menopause and the end of her reproductive lifespan.” They are identified as “Aamissat” in Arabic, “Spinster” in English, “Vieilles Filles” in France, “Alte Jungge” in German and “Dakhtar Tarsheed” in Persian. All these words have a common thread besides their references to the category of unmarried women. Webster’s Dictionary defines spinster in two main senses, (i) a women who spins, or whose occupation is to spin, (ii) an unmarried and single women. The term originally identifies the girl’s and women who spun wool. In medieval times, this was one of the few livelihoods available to an unmarried woman in order to live independently. During ‘Elizabethan era’, Spinster comes to indicate a women or a girl of marriageable age who was unwilling or unable to marry. It also evolves into a legal term to describe an unmarried woman. The emergence of these new terminologies relating to Spinster brings a massive change to traditional societal process. In a traditional Indian society, marriage has been regarded not only as an utmost importance in Indian necessity, but also as a social and religious duty. Marriage remains as an important social institution of Indian society. When a woman has not got married by her late 30’s, she is being pressurized to get marry, by her relatives, colleagues or even friends. In addition to that, people of India believe that marriage and raising a family is a religious obligation and also religious duty. Therefore, marriage is considered compulsory for most of the people. The Vedic literature has also considered marriage as a sacrament for women. According to Alteker, “From the religious point of view, he or she remains incomplete and is not fully eligible to participate in any other sacrament”. Therefore, Vedic literature describes an unmarried person as unholy. An offering made by a maiden or a Spinster is thought to be unacceptable by Gods and ancestors. Thus, marriage is a form of purification, therefore, occupies an important place in women’s life.

From the evidences of history and from the Assamese literature, it is easily understandable that Assam is also not an exception regarding female marriage as they are obliged to get married at an early age. The traditional views are still prevalent in Assamese society; girls’ should not remain unmarried not at least as a matter of choice. To remain unmarried is regarded as an exceptional, justified, only in certain exceptional circumstances. In today’s globalised era women participation and their achievements has slowly changed the traditional views on the role and status of women in the contemporary Assamese society. Because of the changes in the socialization pattern, opportunities for higher education and employment opportunity has opened and broadened the societal attitudes towards women and on their role in the society. The rising rate of education among the traditional Assamese society has increased the age of marriage for women. Spread of education has brought new ideals among all sections of people including women. Therefore, the unmarried status of women is no longer considered as exceptional but a phenomenon among urbanized people.

**History of the status of unmarried women**

The position and the status of single women during the Vedic time reveal that they enjoyed a high status. The birth of a girl child was not regarded as inauspicious, and marriage was not regarded as compulsory. A girl in Vedic India waited until she could find the right partner for marriage, despite this she could even decide to remain unmarried. Further, she had a high sense of security due to her right to paternal property. Thus, unmarried women enjoyed considerable status and authority during Vedic time. Neither she was discriminated nor her status lowered because of her singlehood. During the Post-Vedic age the position of single women slowly began to decline. As marriage came to be considered as a goal for women, not having sex outside marriage of unmarried women was doubted. Hence, she came to be looked down upon. According to Manu the ‘Father’ is responsible if he does not arrange his daughter’s marriage at the proper time and it was believed that a women remain married could not attain salvation. However, Manu even insisted on a worthy husband for a girl. The life and liberty of the girl was considered equally important. She was not meant to be disposed off to
any unworthy youth like cattle. Thus, the parents of the girls were given a certain degree of freedom to keep their unmarried daughter at home. However, the parents wanted to relieve themselves of the responsibility and anxiety to secure their daughter as early as possible and that perception forced them to arrange their daughter’s marriage even before her puberty. Thus, the custom of child marriage became prevalent. Marriage becomes the only consideration for the parents. That is why, they offered dowry to secure their daughter’s life. Therefore, gradually members of their own family looked down girls as they caused heavy responsibility and expenses. As a consequence of all these considerations unmarried women were severely condemned and had not given the status that they deserve to live self dependently in society.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The paper has attempted to figure out the socio-economic conditions of Spinsters. In doing so, it is worthwhile to speak a little about the significance of the study. The study is covering that segment of population in the society, which has been frequently neglected by its members. The sense of negligence regarding Spinsters is not formed in a day; it is a long back process. The essence of such kind of negligence on the part of society emerges as it has been immensely linked with marriage, a holly and purified ‘social institution’. Traditionally society believes that without marriage a girl or a woman cannot attain holiness and purity in her life. It is only through marriage that enables them to achieve so. Such kind of belief makes society to put Spinsters into an isolated category. This isolation gradually takes the shape of gender discrimination and gender trouble. Women are constantly being victimized and exploited by society but unmarried women or Spinsters are victims of a double exploitation. This is because they not only suffer as women but also as single women. They feel lonely and absence of a partner’s protection and sometimes of a family. Therefore, they are vulnerable to economic, social, psychological and physical exploitation. Social problems of unmarried women are classified in terms of the social stigma attached and the social restrictions imposed on them. The social boycott or rejection that society imposes on them results in their low social status. Ironically, the society that the present paper is taking into consideration is patriarchal in nature, where male predominance is prominent. Under this backdrop, single women can be divided into two broad segments; working and non-working. While the position of that non-working depended Spinster is worse. Without a job to maintain them financially is not possible. The main problem is that of their economic insecurity and dependence on family members or relatives to meet their basic needs. Their own family members and relatives harass these women. This constant feeling of dependence often makes them miserable. For the working spinsters it is of inadequate income and sometimes exploitation in the workplace causing a major problem to them. In a society dominated by male, single women find it extremely difficult to live with full freedom. Similarly it is difficult to find living arrangements for a single woman, if kin members not accommodate her after the death of her parents. In society, they also face a lot of problems. Psychologically they feel insecure, mental conflicts and live a lonely life. The society rules, values, norms never allow a girl to remain unmarried and thus is not very conducive to those who has not got married. Besides all these problems, there are number of other problems that single women have to face. Under such circumstances, the need for the study is obvious. A country known for its rich tradition and vast spiritual and cultural heritage, where on the one hand women are worshipped as ‘Shakti’ and on the other especially the unmarried woman faces inhuman treatment. This remains a matter of great concern and therefore their plight and problems need greater attention.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Jeuti Baruah on her book “Single Women in Assamese Hindu Society” stresses on three parts of womanhood. The first part is highlighted on Spinsters, those who have not married. In the second part on widows, those who have lost their husbands and in the third part emphasis was made on the divorced women, those whose husbands have left them alone. In all these parts, women are usually found being in trouble. In the unmarried category, she has mentioned that there are two main reasons for remaining unmarried. The first one is unmarried status by choice and decision of a woman herself
and the second one is due to compelling circumstances beyond the control of a woman. To explain the causes of being unmarried the writer took 110 respondents in the Guwahati city. She had also observed the social background and the living arrangement of the unmarried women.

M.S. krishnakumari on her book “Status of single women in India”: A study of Spinsters, widows and divorcees (1987) had focused on the status of single women in India. Discrimination towards all section of women exist from the period of “Manu’s smriti”, the discrimination in case of single women is twofold as a women in one hand and as a single woman on the other. In her book, Krishnakumari stated a comparative study on the socio-economic background about psychological and sexual life of single women in Indian context. In the introductory chapter, the author has given a brief history of single women and their position from the Vedic period to the post independence era. In the third chapter, the author has mentioned about the various problems regarding working and non-working spinsters. Finally, she has concluded with a comparative analysis of the single women.

Janapathy on her book “Indian women through the ages” (2002) had focused on the historical perspectives of women in three broad parts. The first part explains the history of ancient times, the second part describes the medieval times and the last part explains the history of modern times. In this book it is focused that the status or the position of women in the ancient time is superior and therefore the age is also known as golden age. However, in the medieval time, position of the Indian women came to be deteriorated. Nevertheless, because of the various reform movements in the beginning of the 19th century the condition of women is likely improving. Education, employment opportunities for women rising marriageable age widow marriage act, abolition of sati, dowry are become possible in the modern era. Because of ‘Urbanization’ and ‘industrialization’, the women came to the work place. In the ‘Gandhian era’ two women got their desired freedom for being self sufficient through cottage industries at village level. After the national movement, a large portion of women came outside home and finally takes part in various organizations for the right of women. Thus, the position and attitudes of women have changed with the changing Society. This book draws attention of society towards women issues and speed up their progress in order to bring them equal position with men.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To do a research in social science, it is necessary to identify the objectives of the study. The main objective of this paper is to study the socio-economic background of the Spinsters residing in Guwahati and their perception towards life.

Field of the Study

Guwahati, a city within the state of Assam, has been chosen as the field of the present study. The selection of the city for the proposed study is made due to its growing number of unmarried women, who are becoming gradually a cause of great concern for the society in general and for the humanity in particular. Guwahati is situated on the south bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra at an altitude of 55 meter above the sea level. However, Guwahati is surrounded by many small hills, the municipal area of the town and the plane lands. Guwahati is the temporary capital of Assam as well as the head quarter of the district Kamrup. Nevertheless, apart from the administrative aspect, its importance lies in being the centre of trade, commerce, industry, education and culture. The study has been confined to unmarried women, who are living in the urban environment. The process of urbanization has taken an explosive growth in Guwahati too like the other parts of the country in the last few decades, which has created opportunities for education, employment and living outside the rigid and limited social environments of villages. Besides other migrants, many unmarried women of diverse socio-economic background have found their way to the city. The set up of Guwahati city has not merely provided a comparatively more flexible social environment for adjustment to the Spinsters, but also provides manifold opportunities to earn a livelihood.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In social science research among many of its components methodology and data collection occupies a significant place. As such, to explore the socio-economic background of the Spinsters and their perception towards life with reference to Guwahati City, both primary and secondary sources of data collection method have been adopted. In selecting the respondents, it was kept in mind that the respondents must be unmarried women falling in the age-group of 45 and above. Data has been collected with help of interview schedule. The schedule has been divided in two parts, first part put emphasis on the socio-economic background of the respondents and the second part focuses on respondent’s perception towards life.

Spinster: Their Socio-Economic Background: Socio-economic background of an individual plays a decisive role in the formation of an individual’s personality and prepares him/her to integrate with the society either in a favorable or in an adverse condition. In this context, the socio-economic background of the unmarried women plays a vital role in determining their status in the society.

To find the socio-economic background of the respondents the paper put emphasis on the age composition, community and caste structure, level of education, family pattern and occupational structure, social and religious participation of the respondents. During the field study, it is found that all the 40 respondents were in the age group of 45 and above. This is because at this age group there remain very little chances on their part to get married. Another reason for this exception may be due to the fact that at this age, women finally and definitely settle down in their unmarried status. This is a matter of great social significance. A considerable number of women acquired the single status at the peak of their lives. In this study, out of total 40 respondents, 55% (i.e. 22) of the respondents are under the age group of 45-50 years of age, 15% (i.e. 6) of unmarried women are under the age group of 51-55 years, 25% (i.e. 10) of respondents are of 56-60 years and the rest of the 5% (i.e. 2) are from the age group of 60-66. From the above data, it is clear that the most vulnerable age of being unmarried in the Guwahati city, lies within the age group of 45-50 years. They have just crossed their marriageable age, but they are still thinking about their marriage and a few of them preparing for an unmarried life for the rest of their life. The second vulnerable age groups among the respondents found in the study lies between the age group of 56-60 years. In this age group, most of the respondents are definitely settle down in their unmarried status. The third vulnerable age groups among the respondents are between the age group of 51-55 years, these groups of respondents are unhappy with their situation and in lots of troubles. The last vulnerable age group in this study is about the age of 60-66 years, most of them are physically and also mentally ill, they think themselves as a burden for family members if they have family or kin members.

The women respondents those were chosen, on the basis of purposive sampling, for the study is basically from Hindu religion. They consist of Brahmin (Nepali, Bihari, Assamese), Kalita, Nath, Das, Deka, Rajbonshi etc. Like all other parts of India, Brahmins have high ritual status in Assam too. Two other castes, namely, Kayastha and Kalita also enjoy high status in Assam next to the Brahmins. Through the study it has been found that 25% of the respondents belong to Brahmin, again 25% of them belong to Kalita category, and 30% of the respondents are from Nath category, 10% of the unmarried women from the category of Das, 5% Rajbonshi and the rest of 5% from the Deka category. From these data, it is observed that the most of the respondents are belonging to Nath community, they become unmarried and got engaged in certain work for their livelihood. Next vulnerable community of being unmarried is the Brahmins and Kalita, who are at the top of the hierarchy. The main reason behind these two communities unmarried status is the caste constraint. They and their family need a suitable partner from the same caste and community at her tender age but faces difficulty in doing so.

Assamese Hindu society is characterized by the patrilocal. Either an unmarried woman lives in the paternal house where her father is the head of the household or with her kin members if both the parents left no more. However, due to the new situation of spinsterhood, arising out of various causes, they feel the necessity of having separate accommodations. Therefore, to know the socio economic
backround of the spinsters, it is important to know about their family pattern. On the basis of the study it was found that 60% of the spinsters were living in nuclear family pattern, it shows a transition of the traditional family pattern. The rest of the 40% share their livelihood in a traditional joint family.

Educational attainment of women too plays an important role in determining her standard of living, socio-economic status and the esteems that are accorded to her by the society. Educational attainment influences her outlook, attitudes and capacity for adjustment to the circumstances. Educational status can therefore be considered as a useful index to socio economic position of an individual. Therefore, in terms of attaining educational qualification, the respondents were divided into seven broad categories. There were 5% from the illiterate category, 20% M.E. 40% cleared H.S.L.C, 20% from H.S., 10% completed B.A. and 5% respondents are master degree holders. From the above it is noticed that most of the unmarried women are educated up to matriculation level. In comparison to the matriculation only half of the respondents have cleared higher secondary. Only 10% have passed bachelors degree. A few percentages of the respondents are highly educated.

Occupation is also related with education, higher the qualification higher the income source. Therefore, it is another important indicator of socio economic status. The various occupations in which the single women are engaged in provide us with an idea of their adjustment to urban setting up of Guwahati city as well as their economic status. 65% of the total 40 respondents are from working category and rest of 35% from the non-working category. Most of the respondents have certain engagement for their self-dependence. Some of them earn very less which is insufficient to fulfill their basic needs, therefore they somehow dependent on their kin members. The rest of the respondents who are not engaged in any jobs are fully dependent on their family members. In most of the cases family or kin members are primarily found fulfilling their needs. They have no time for taking rest and attending family occasions. Social and religious participation and non-participation of respondents show their social position in the society. If the respondents regularly attend social functions (such as Bihu, Theatre programme etc.) religious ceremonies (like Durga puja, Shiva puja, Ganesh puja etc.) then it shows that the society is accepting their unmarried status. To know about the participation rate of the respondents in social occasions, they are divided into two main categories one is the ‘Participants’ and the other is ‘Non-Participants’. Based on this, 90% of the total respondents are found participating in socio-religious occasions or function, from those 40% respondents belongs to the category of regular participants and the rest 50% of the respondents are found participating frequently. Despite, these other 10% of the respondents never attends any social, religious as well as family functions. Sometimes it is because of their busy schedules but mostly because of hesitation to face the society and relatives.

Spinster: Their Perception towards Life: Another important objective of the study is to observe the perception or attitudes of the unmarried women towards their life. With the changing status of women in the society from Vedic period to the post independence, the attitude of unmarried women has got a sea change towards life. Because of this unexceptional condition in the traditional Assamese society, they face lots of gender trouble from society, family and most importantly from her relatives as well. They are neglected not only in the family but also from the society. Besides that they are psychologically depressed with their situation. They feel social stigma, the problems of loneliness and other psychological illness relating to their mind and body. Thus, the trouble faced by Spinsters is not only of sociological but also of psychological in nature.

In order to find out the perception or attitude of the Spinsters towards their life an attempt has been made here to have a look at the various influential factors that lead the respondents to accept an unmarried status. It is observed by the survey that most of the women remain unmarried due to their responsibility to support poor family to which they belong, their physical disability, loss of parents during childhood and lack of suitable partner during their marriageable age etc. The data collected from the field has shown various causes behind unmarried status of women. It was observed that there are various causes of a Spinster for being unmarried. 90% of women have remained unmarried because of their inability to find a suitable person. The major reason behind their unmarried status was the loss
of their parents in early childhood. Out of 90% respondents, 25% of them were not getting married because of the death of their parents at an early age. To support poor parents and family members also accounted for 20% of women to remain as unmarried. Only 5% of women were unmarried because of their physical disability. Despite all of these causes, 15% of women came under the category of other circumstances, such as various prejudices in the society, because of the family negligence occur in case of the younger daughter, because of bad familial records etc. Due to spinsterhood, 55% of the respondents feel a sort of inferiority in the society. They feel inferior because, they do not have any security for their future life. They are mostly dependent on the kin members and parents for their needs. They felt themselves as a burden upon the kin members and for the relatives. In some cases, the Spinsters were bounded in household work for the whole day and night. They even do not get time to take rest for a minute. Thus, their kin members for their own interest use them as a housemaid. Most of the spinsters were unhappy with their degrading socio-economic and psychological position. However, the remaining Spinsters felt happy with their position, their socio-economic status sounds good. This happens only in a process where the spinsters are engaged in some occupation. From the observation, it has been seen that 35 percent of the respondents are self-sufficient. They are not interested to get married now, because they do not want to bind in a family tie at this stage of their life. According to them life is what you want to be, no definitions for life. On what direction you need to turn your life, the life turns that way. They thought that marriage is important for the various societal and familial bonds, but if someone needs not found a proper partner that might devastate their happy life. Most of them thought that they are quite happy with their spinsterhood because now a days the rate of divorce, wife burning, dowry, sexual harassment among the family, extra marital affairs, marital unhappiness are increasing, which are dangerous for a marital life. Hence, they are happy with their unmarried life.

On the other hand, 65 percent of the respondents were unhappy with their unmarried status because of their inability to secure future life in the society. Most of the respondents in this category are not self sufficient and are found dependent on the family members. They need a partner for the rest of their life not only for security but also for sharing their feelings with a person who understand and respect their feelings. Thus, this portion of unmarried women needs marriage for their rest of the life.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates the socio-economic background of the unmarried women of Assamese Hindu society; it also tries to know about the factors contributing to their singlehood. Both Indian and Assamese culture promotes marriage and family as the fundamental unit that makes up a society. Thus, the life of a woman as a member of that society is predetermined by their roles within marriage and family institution. This leaves single women at a marginal position, as they do not fulfill the role of wives and mothers. However, single women still could define themselves within familial role by being responsible daughters and at the same time, they develop their self-concept as respectable individuals by being successful professionals. Indian woman should fight against these existing views towards them and should try to make herself free from the secondary status that is accorded to her in this male dominated society. This struggle is one of a continuous in nature, and should begin at the household level where the socialization of both the male and the female primarily starts. It becomes very essential that the right social values should be inculcated from childhood, which should be beginning at birth itself. Parents should provide equal opportunities to both the female and male children. The ideas that careers are for boys and marriage for girls should be wiped out. Marriage should not be made as the ultimate aim of a girl’s life. Daughters who want to remain unmarried for various reasons, like to pursue a career should be encouraged and their unmarried status should in no way cause an impediment to progress in their career or in their personal life. All educated people should strive to change the society and its outlook through education and social awakening and action in order to raise the status of single women. The right type of education to help them to face the problems of life and build up right attitude towards life is essential. In this area the media like Newspapers, Radio, and TV have a large role to play in reaching the masses. Media should make deliberate attempts to negate the prejudices that exist against singlehood. Thus, the society should sympathetic on the spinsters.
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