

Women Beyond The Barriers: A Study On Social Taboos And Women Empowerment Among The Deories Of Assam

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Abstract

In contemporary society, researchers hold varying perspectives on the issues related to women's empowerment. Some researchers argue that tribal women are more empowered compared to non-tribal women, while some other researchers view empowerment as a broader issue encompassing all women. Diverse ethnic groups possess different cultures in Assam, which makes them unique to each other, wherein social taboos are deeply embedded to each culture. Similar to feminist theories, the gender division is not a natural phenomenon, it is seen as a social construct reinforcing patriarchal hierarchical structures and unequal social orders. Social taboos, gender dynamics, and empowerment are three interconnected subjects in societal existence, where social taboos significantly affect the empowerment process. The influence of social taboos on women's empowerment varies depending on cultural norms, affecting tribal and non-tribal women differently. Despite these challenges, women from both segments of society are actively striving to overcome obstacles and address issues in their lives, demonstrating resilience and determination in their pursuit of empowerment. This paper aims to explore the impact of social taboos on women's empowerment among the Deori tribe, one of Assam's largest tribal communities and some other non-tribal women in Dhemaji district. The study draws on both primary field data and secondary sources for analysis.

Key words: Social taboos, Deori, Women empowerment, Gender, Tribal, Non-tribal.

Introduction:

The term 'Taboo' originates from 'tapu' in Oceanic languages, particularly Polynesian language, meaning 'prohibition' or 'forbidden'. Taboos are some unwritten rules rooted in cultural, religious or societal norms which play a vital role in shaping social identity of people and can vary among different groups. In every society most of the taboos are associated with women's sexuality, menstruation, and reproduction and persisted with daily life in many cultures for centuries. However, taboos are not static in nature; they evolve over time, with some disappearing and some becoming more prominent. A section of scholars argued that taboos are often stemming from deep-seated cultural, religious, or social beliefs. Fershtman (2008) in his study highlighted taboos as strong social norms enforced through societal punishments.

Social taboos and norms are fundamental elements in every human society, reflecting deeply held beliefs, constructions and perceptions within specific cultural contexts. Both, tribal and non-tribal societies have a collective historical narrative that informs and governs their cultural norms, including the acceptance and adherence to social taboos. Literature

reveals that social taboos are often intertwined with societal expectations, norms and regulations, governing behaviors deemed sacred or prohibited based on moral, religious or customary frameworks. It is observed that among the Deori community, one of the largest tribes of Assam, certain social taboos manifest through rituals like the *Raj Kcbang* ceremony which aims at ensuring the well-being of the entire community. The ritual traditionally excludes women from participation. If any woman in the village is menstruating during the ritual, she is expected to temporarily leave the village until the ceremony concludes. Thus, social taboos are some social or religious customs that restrict or prohibit specific practices, contributing significantly to the cultural fabric and identity of a community.

The unique customs and traditions of diverse ethnic groups of India contribute to its rich tapestry of culture. So far as empowerment of women is concerned, the ingrained social taboos in these cultures have a profound impact on the process of women's empowerment. Women's empowerment encompasses various aspects of social, political and economic status entailing initiatives such as education for all, equal job opportunities, fostering financial independence to women and so on. In societies like Assam, the gender hierarchy is not a natural order, it is a 'social construct' aimed at perpetuating patriarchal norms. Feminist Ann Oakley argues that gender is a social and psychological framework. If we draw a feminist perspective, as put forward by Nivedita Menon, the distinction between gender or the production of men and women is a construction of unequal social orders. Consequently, social taboos differ for men and women, reflecting and perpetuating gender-based hierarchies. In patriarchal societies like India, women are often marginalized and there have an unequal hierarchy for male and female. Thus, the concept of women's empowerment arises from recognition of women's resilience and the collective effort by the government and some social thinkers to dismantle barriers hindering their progress.

The interrelation of three concepts, viz. social taboos, gender dynamics, and women's empowerment is intrinsic to societal existence. Because of specificity of social taboos for different cultural groups, particularly between tribal and non-tribal groups, understanding their impact on women's empowerment and women are become empowered or not within distinct cultural contexts is imperative. So far as tribal society is concerned, it is assumed that their societies have unique social taboos that vary depending on their cultural beliefs and traditions. Taboos in respect of eye contact with the authority, physical touch or public displays of affection, food sharing, intertribal relationship and some other beliefs related to menstruation, death and mourning, childbirth, etc. are some of the examples of taboos prevalent in tribal societies. But it is important to recognize that these taboos can vary widely across different tribal groups and should be understood within their cultural context. On the other hand, tribal societies are not necessarily more liberal than non tribal societies when it comes to social taboos. In fact, tribal societies often have their own unique set of strict social taboos and cultural norms that are deeply rooted in their traditions and beliefs. Subsequently, some of the available literatures revealed that the tribal women are more liberal in nature whereas some others argued non tribal women as more. Besides, a preliminary study in two Deori villages in Dhemaji district of Assam revealed that tribal women are, in fact, more liberal than non tribal women. Paradoxically, despite their liberal attitudes, tribal women have significantly lower participation in their day to day economic, education and political activities than non tribal women. This disparity can be attributed to the unique cultural norms and taboos that shape the tribal community's worldview and fostering a distinct attitude that leads tribal women to perceive them as liberal within their own cultural context. On the other hand, as the concept of women's empowerment gains popularity globally for societal development; it is essential to recognize that its interpretation varies across cultural boundaries. Women's empowerment not only includes their participation in economic and political activities but it also includes their active participation in decision making process. But due to their liberal nature and influence of

cultural norms and taboos tribal women cannot participate in the above areas and consequently they have least contribution to societal development. Therefore, it is important to explore the influence of social taboos on women's empowerment within diverse cultural contexts of different tribes.

1.1. Like other parts of India socio-cultural taboos are also prevalent among the tribal groups of Assam. Studies explored that the social taboos prevalent in a particular tribal society are not similar to those of the other tribal communities in Assam due to different socio-economic and cultural elements and their perception towards them. Therefore, different tribal communities of Assam have different social taboos in their respective societies. On the other hand, despite the widespread notion of 'Women Empowerment' in contemporary discourse, numerous studies highlighted the various barriers women encounter in their daily lives. Existing social taboos emerge as a significant factor contributing to these barriers. Thus there is a need of study how social taboos have prevented women from achieving their full potential, both personally and professionally, in tribal society. Of course, in contemporary Indian society, women have started to challenge these taboos and break free from the constraints that have held them back for long. It is also necessary to study how women break the barriers in their day to day lives. On this backdrop the present study tries to examine the impact of social taboos on women empowerment particularly among the women of Deori tribe of Assam.

Objectives:

The Objectives of this paper includes -

- To study about different types of social taboos prevalent in Deori society.
- To study about the social construction of social taboos in Deori society.
- To study about how social taboos impact the process of empowerment of women in Deori society.

Methodology:

The interrelationship between social taboos and women empowerment has been examined among the Deori tribe by applying various parameters of women empowerment. Being a qualitative study, it includes both primary and secondary data collection methods. A cross-sectional approach was carried out to gather data from Deori women in Dhemaji district of Assam. Required data were exclusively collected from two Deori villages in the Bordoloni area of Dhemaji district, viz. Cheniya Deori Gaon and No 2 Ghatapathar Bali Deori Gaon. Primary data have been collected using observation, interviews by semi structured and unstructured questions and informal discussions. On the other hand, the secondary data sources comprised different journals, books and articles.

Discussion:

Culture encompasses beliefs, customs, institutions, social norms, social taboos and traditions shaping individuals' way of life. From a Functionalist perspective, the diverse institutions of society and cultures of different ethnic groups functioning as a whole, which contribute to India's rich diversity. Within this diverse nation, both tribal and non-tribal populations coexist together, each with its distinct cultures. Social taboos are integral to culture, often governing and conversion behavior based on cultural, religious or societal norms. In the context of women's empowerment, social taboos, consciously or unconsciously affects the process, deeply intertwined with gender dynamics. Because, in many Indian societies, there exists a gender-based social order and power structure that varies according to gender. Gender, as articulated by Menon (2012) is stratified into male and female categories, each category associated with specific roles, values and beliefs. Kakati (2014) further emphasizes that women's position and empowerment levels are determined by societal gender relations, where

women's roles and rights are often subordinate to those of men across various spheres of human functioning.

Most of the tribal societies share common cultural norms and social taboos that distinguish them from non-tribal communities. Tribal societies often have unique cultural practices and social rules that set them apart from non-tribal. They have shared some particular type of traditions, rituals, values that are passing down through generation to generation. It includes some specific ceremonies, traditional clothing, some unique living arrangements and unique forms of art. Similarly, each and every other non-tribal ethnic group share and uphold their cultural norms, values, beliefs and try to maintain their identity with a dominant culture. Hence, diverse ethnic groups possess different cultures in Assam, which makes them unique to each other, wherein social taboos are deeply embedded to each culture. Certainly, while it is true that many of the tribal societies share common cultural norms and social taboo such as some particular common rituals, beliefs, traditions, prohibitions that define their way of life. But each tribe also has its own unique cultural identity. So, it means that while there are overarching similarities, each tribal group has distinct traditions, languages and practices that set them apart. For example; different tribes may have their own specific ceremonies, style of dress, their unique histories, showcasing the rich diversity within the broader category of tribal societies.

The Deori is one of the largest tribal groups of Assam. Within the Deori community, individuals are typically categorized into four groups: Dibongia, Bor-geeya, Tengaponiya and Patar-goya. Social customs and traditions hold significant importance in their cultural fabric with a prevailing patriarchal system governing societal structures. Despite this patriarchal framework, the status of women within Deori society is notably elevated. Dutta (2014) said that women hold a prominent position within Deori society, evidenced by practices such as property inheritance. In cases where there are no male heirs, property is distributed among daughters, who can retain ownership even after marriage. Moreover, if a family has only one child, a daughter, she can inherit the entire property after her father's demise. However, it's noted that some researchers highlighted a preference for sons over daughters within the community. In contrast, non-tribal communities also adhere to patriarchal systems, but instances of property distribution among daughters are relatively rare. In cases where there are no male heirs, property typically passes to male relatives within the father's lineage.

During menstruation, societal taboos often restrict women, imposing limitations and isolation. Certain religions even exclude women from various activities during this period. Among the Deori community, however, women enjoy the freedom to carry on with their daily activities during menstruation, without facing any specific restrictions. Nonetheless, the process begins with puberty rituals, where girls are required to stay indoors and adhere to certain rules and regulations. Dutta (2014) notes that during their maidenhood, Deori girls have the freedom to participate in festivals, including singing and dancing, while married women tend to avoid outdoor activities. In contrast, in other communities such as Konch and Kalita, strict rules are imposed during menstruation, prohibiting women from engaging in household chores, outdoor activities or entering the kitchen for cooking etc. Menstruating women are often considered unclean during this time. Some respondents justify these restrictions as a means for women to rest and maintain hygiene during menstruation, ensuring their well-being.

Religious taboos significantly influence women's everyday lives, dictating their behavior and delineating permissible activities that what she can do or what not. Sharma (2019) highlighted that among the Deori tribe, certain rituals, such as the *Raj Kcbang*, are observed for well being of entire community. These rituals are exclusively reserved for men and female members are completely barred from participation. Additionally, menstruating women are expected to leave the village until the ritual concludes. Similar prohibitions against women's participation exist in other non-tribal societies, as example is *Bhauna*. Bhauna, a traditional

religious performance is annually (Basarekiya) conducted in many villages for the community's well-being, with only male actors (Bhaoriya) predominantly assuming the roles. Women's participation in Bhaona performances is often restricted, purportedly due to concerns related to menstruation.

Over the time, pre-birth rituals have evolved among both the Deori and non-tribal communities. During pregnancy, particularly among the Dibangiya and Borgaya Deories, certain taboos are observed. Sharma (2019) notes that pregnant women are traditionally prohibited from passing by cremation grounds, seeking shade under large trees or traversing through dense forests alone, as these locations are believed to be inhabited by evil spirits. Additionally, pregnant women abstain from consuming food during solar and lunar eclipses. Similar taboos are prevalent across various societies, such as refraining from killing animals or engaging in activities like fishing, knitting or cutting objects, as these actions are believed to potentially harm the unborn child. Pre-birth rituals exhibit striking similarities across different communities.

Remarriage customs are largely consistent across societies, yet widow remarriage remains taboo in certain communities. In the early societies, stringent rituals were employed to deter widow remarriage, such as having widows bite heated cane sticks to yellow their teeth, rendering them less desirable for potential suitors. However, contemporary studies indicate a shifting attitude towards widow remarriage, with acceptance becoming more prevalent over time. Among the Deori community, widow remarriage is generally accepted. Boruah (2020) said that divorce rates reported to be low in Deori society. However, as discussed by Sarasvati (1888), higher-caste Hindu widows, particularly those without children, often face societal challenges and discrimination. This reality persists in contemporary societies, where women may encounter hidden taboos, such as being addressed by unpleasant names or being excluded from certain religious activities, especially if their father or another family member passes away soon after their birth or marriage.

In the contemporary society, newly developed cultural activities related to food often involve food taboos, which dictate that what foods are deemed appropriate or prohibited. Various taboos, from food to religious and cultural practices, significantly impact women's diets in all the communities whether it tribal or non-tribal group. Women's bodies are closely associated with food items, affecting events like pregnancy. Among the Deori and other non-tribal communities, food taboos are seen as a way to maintain identity. Similarly, body shaming causes serious damage to a person's physical and psychological health. Women, in particular, suffer from body shaming because beauty is often defined by individual color, size, and shape. These perspectives on women's bodies greatly impact their health. In many cases, researchers argue that women's bodies are often treated as sex objects by men, leading to situations where women become pregnant according to their husbands' desires. Pregnant women may even face questions like "Whose child is this?" While women know the child is theirs, in a patriarchal context, this question has a hidden meaning. It asks whose caste the child belongs to and whose property the child can claim Menon (2012). He argued that "motherhood is a biological fact and fatherhood is a sociological fiction." Women's bodies are often used as commodities of production; if a woman is unable to give birth, she is oppressed or replaced by another woman.

Both tribal and non-tribal cultures enforce gender-specific taboos, delineating certain behaviors and knowledge as appropriate for particular gender. Kakati (2014) notes that among tribal societies, the sexual division of labour is regulated by taboos and there is a control of gender specific dominant knowledge. For instance, women are often barred from learning medicinal practices under the belief that their efficacy would be diminished if used during menstruation. Following the patriarchal order prevalent in these societies, where male members exert control over women's power, decision-making processes, economic production systems and access to knowledge.

Many sources state that tribal women are more hardworking than non-tribal women, while other sources assert that non-tribal women are also very active and hardworking. Boruah (2020) noted that the Deori community is primarily dependent on agriculture. Deori women are very hardworking, often working from morning until evening. They engage in various activities, including household work, fishing and farming etc. Due to the impact of education and globalization, some Deori women are now engaging in professions such as teaching, nursing, ASHA worker, Anganwadi worker and other services. Studies show that women from non-tribal communities also engage in similar activities for income, in addition to agriculture. This indicates that the socialization process significantly impacts the working sector, as the distinction between masculine and feminine work is shaped from birth. Thus, socialization processes play a crucial role in determining the types of work women undertake.

Gender equality is intricately linked to the empowerment of women, which entails granting them equal power and decision-making authority at all levels of society, including the household and institutions. This involves raising awareness, enhancing access to resources and fostering self-confidence among women. The concept of women's empowerment has gained global traction, with its success contingent upon navigating and challenging various social taboos, which exert differing influences based on cultural contexts. Many societies are now adept at preserving their cultural identities while also embracing modernization and overcoming entrenched social barriers. Although cultural norms and beliefs have evolved to some extent over time, but still more or less efforts persist to maintain these traditions as markers of identity.

Social taboos, particularly in Indian societies have long been criticized for their detrimental impact on women's empowerment. In contemporary society, these taboos affect women differently across various cultural groups. Women's empowerment is intricately linked to factors such as status, equal participation in production systems, engagement in commercial sectors, improved living standards, self-confidence, access to health education and so on. Women are now challenging and overcoming these prohibitions, recognizing them as barriers to development. Heightened awareness, particularly through sex education has enabled women to demonstrate their capabilities across diverse fields such as media, banking and IT, thereby dismantling stereotypes. Furthermore, the stigma surrounding menstruation is gradually eroding as women advocate for menstrual hygiene and openly discuss their menstrual cycles, challenging societal taboos. By entering diverse workplaces, pursuing education, careers and political positions; women are driving towards empowerment, not only for themselves but also for other women, thereby fostering a culture of collective advancement.

Conclusion:

The preceding discussion underscores the intimate relationship between gender and taboos, highlighting how social taboos rooted in diverse cultural norms, shape and affect the process of women's empowerment in different ways. Tribal societies often adhere to some taboos rooted in supernatural beliefs, using these taboos to preserve their unique cultural identity. Conversely, non-tribal communities maintain certain taboos to uphold tradition and reinforce social hierarchies. Women have long faced challenges stemming from societal taboos, but they have gradually overcome these obstacles. Through their resilience and hard work, women have made significant strides in various fields, including education, careers and political leadership, catalyzing positive societal change. The concept of "women beyond the barriers" rings true as women continue to dismantle social taboos that impede their choices and opportunities. Today, countless empowered women serve as exemplars of progress, not only empowering themselves but also uplifting the lives of countless other women. Thus, women's empowerment transcends individual achievement, becoming a catalyst for broader societal transformation.

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