

Book Review

**Traversing the Patriarchal Universe : A Study of
Language and Literature of North East India in
Women in Dictionary and *Birendra Kumar
Bhattacharyya***

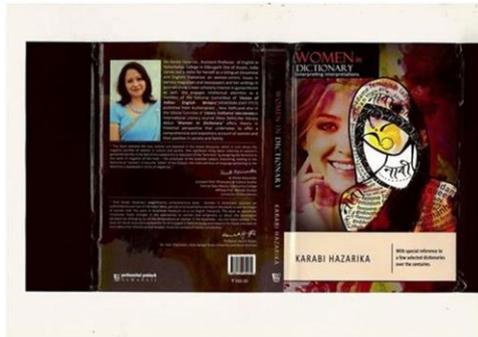
Dr . RATAN BHATTACHARJEE

Associate Professor and Chairperson

Post Graduate Dept of English

Dum Dum Motijheel College, West Bengal State University

Kolkata, India



“Rich in details, extremely well documented and argued, *Women in Dictionary* makes a challenging and pleasant reading, as well as an engaging travel through the universe of patriarchy, where language betrays the imposition of male supremacy”- Professor Elisabetta Marino very rightly comments in her foreword to Prof. Karabi Hazarika’s book which is going to be one of the literary milestones of Assamese –English literature and as well as of women literature. As a human being both men and women share the same natural

resources , geographical space , but unfortunately as a being they live in two different worlds. This book is a dictionary but it is the confluence of both language and literature without which both literature and language are incomplete and even impossible. Prof. Hazarika attempts to analyze some women related words from a few selected English and Assamese dictionaries to find out how women have been presented in dictionary over the centuries. She has taken for her discussion Dr. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary 2010*, *Hemkosh* (1900), *Hemkosh*(2011), and *Asomiya Jatiyo Abhidhan (2010-12)*. The comparative study of Hemkosh Ist and 14th edition along with *Asomiya Jatiyo Abhidhan* is quite interesting and scholarly. In every Assamese dictionary, there are many words to explain the beauty of a woman – Aparupa, Dhowola , Priyadarshini ,Bamura, Manjurani, Romoni, Rupoi, Lilawati, Sushismita, Shuni, Shromona Anupama and Sundari. The detailed description of all these words reveal the deep analytical perception of the author.

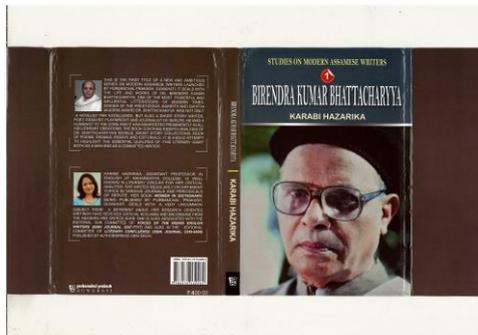
Words related in this dictionary make it clear how women were placed or treated during the 19th century in the Assamese society. All social interaction is gender oriented , and gendered social interaction is guided by status and positions people occupy and roles , the behavior associated with a status. In Assamese society women enjoy considerable freedom compared to the women of the other parts of the country, but here also they are denied their deserving positions , dignity and equality. Words like Angana, Anugaman, Opeswara, Kutni, Akuti, Gabhoru or Osati reveal this impact of inequality. At a time when “Assam was dominated by medieval conservatism, women generally remained confined to their homes, while their spouses were free to enjoy life without any hindrance”(P.120). Prof. Hazarika points out: “In pre-independent Assam, all they had to do was to devote their lives from early girlhood to find a husband and bearing children for him. There was no way she

could even dream about herself except as her children's mother or her husband's wife." Here the study of dictionary becomes a veritable social document on gender discrimination.

Then she observes that Assamese language is not free from the influence of sexist terminology in various spheres of life. She claims "Though it is claimed that the status of women in the Assamese society is quite high in comparison to the other societies of India, the language itself is not out of the influence of sexist terminology which are totally biased and dominated by the male folk." She has given some examples daini, o'soti, beisia, ardhangini, mahimak, sotini, contrasted with words used for men, satampurushia, uttarpurush, baapatisatisaahon, jubasakti, dekasakti, chhatrasakti, natun purush. What emerges from the study of the terms in the dictionaries, is that cultural ideas, symbols, norms, and values play a significant role in the creation of women's images and the differentiation of gender roles. Prof. Hazarika in a lighter vein commented: "Like other parts of India, Assam also followed the law prescribed by Manu." Women have to devote their lives from early girlhood to find a husband and to bear children for him. The power and status relation between groups bear on social identity : the dominant groups in society have the power and the status to impose the dominant groups in society have the power and the status to impose the dominant value system and ideology which serves to legitimize and perpetuate the status quo. Prof. Hazarika establishes successfully that "dictionary definitions are full of notions reflecting the culture and social climate of the time in which they were written." Dr. Rinita Mazumder, Asst. Prof of Philosophy & Cultural Studies, Central New Mexico Community College, University of New Mexico, in her blurb wrote justifiably: "This book explores the way women are depicted in the lexical discourse, which in turn shows the negative position of women in culture and society."

The book contains an impressive bibliography at the end which enriches the content of the book. The binding and cover page deserves all kudos and Jayant Bormudoi commands respect for his art work on the cover page. The readers and researchers will be immensely helped by the publication of this valuable book on language and literature and credit goes to Purbanchal Prakashan, Guwahati. Finally, we may agree with Professor Kausik Gupta, Ex-Vice Chancellor, West Bengal State University and Social Scientist that : “ Prof. Karabi Hazarika’s magnificently comprehensive book *Women in Dictionary* provides an authoritative overview of the major ideas , periods and movements iconised in the words as well as images of women over the years in Assamese literature vis a vis English literature.” We wait for a good reception of the book by the academicians and the researchers all over India and globally too.

A Tribute to the Profound Literary Talent of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya :



Prof. Karabi Hazarika’s book *Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya* belongs to the series of books in English published by Purbanchal Prakash in their *Studies on Modern Assamese Writers*. The book as the writer says in her preface is ‘just a venture to pay tribute to this literary genius by introducing

his profound literary talent to the international public who are still in the dark about this eminent personality for language barrier.” She has brilliantly focused on this most renowned Indian author from the North East region and described him as ‘a humanist and a social thinker who dreamt of a classless society where everyone enjoys equal rights and freedom.” As the man with “a multi –dimensional literary personality” and winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi and Jnanpith Awards, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya enriched literature with his creative writings in the varied literary genres-novels, dramas, short stories , poems and even songs. The author presented Indian society of the post Independence era with a hope of reformation as it was bogged in ruthless selfishness , heartless sufferings .Man is seen by him both as a social and political animal as the focus on revolutionary activities is very much clear in his writings. In his novels, the economic and political exploitation of the people in the Assamese society of his time is highlighted. Side by side there is a portrayal of the familial relationship in conjugal life. Not only Assam, there is a faithful picture available about Manipur of his time and the Naga revolt which occurred as search for identity in the newly independent India.

The book has eight chapters. In the first Chapter a brief introduction is given which is followed by the Chapter called ‘Literary Scene’. The third chapter beautifully analyses the writer as a humanist and socialist. Then the focus of her thinking shifts to the creative genius of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. She starts from the time when in his college days the remarkable short story ‘Morohi Pora Jibon’ was published. The two collection of short stories *Kolong Ajo Boi* (1962) and *Saatsori* (1963) are taken for revealing the vision and verve of this great writer. The analysis is superb. We may refer to the discussion on the short story ‘Ejoni Japani Sowali’ or ‘Rest House’. The earlier one reveals the writer’s positive life. The other story based on Kolkata reveals the author’s

socialist outlook. To some extent, there is a Maugham touch in the story when the writer describes ‘the miserable lives of the artists in Assam reminding us of *The Moon and the Six Pence*. ‘Prajapatir Pakha where Bhattacharyya muses on his socialist thought through the character of Avinash. All are equal and nobody can be subjugated. Prof. Karabi beautifully analyses the art of his short story writing. Sometimes the picture of exploitation in the society is symbolically presented in ‘Maas’ which also reveals the ultimate plight of the exploiters. Prof. Hazarika remarks at one place in the book , “The stories of Birendra Bhattacharyya demolish certain stereotypes about the people from the North East and an endeavour was made to give the willing reader a chance to experience the real North East.” In the novel *Pratipad* the impact of education on women characters is depicted. The novelist believed that ‘Education can provide a route to emancipation for women.’ The major novels taken for discussion are *Mrityunjoy*, *Pratipad*, and *Iyaruvingam* in which the author is loud against all kinds of exploitation. Protest is one key feature of a post colonial text. Gayatri Spivak already rejects any possibility of an outright opposition between colonizers and the colonized. Her point about the silencing of the ‘subaltern’ is that the new empire, new imperialism which had become global and that complicity within its circuits and its operation is inevitable. Prof. Hazarika finds such violent interactions of the subalterns in the novel *Pratipad*. The novel reveals the ways in which post colonial psychology operates on the home front to sustain the imbalances of cultural power that have characterized British India in the colonial period. The analysis of the historical significance of *Iyaruvingam* is simply brilliant. The rise of nationalism among the Naga people was a process that ran parallel to the exposure of the Nagas to the western cultures . The British were the ‘Others’ for the Nagas which helped them in shaping their national identity. The author in the novel presents the struggle for identity and

the conflict between Naga Nationalism and Indian nationalism through his characters with factual descriptions. It is according to Prof. Hazarika, is not 'just a novel dealing with the love stories of a few pair of Naga Youth, it is based on historical facts that can provide a large amount of information about the day to day life of the Nagas, especially of those who lived in Ukhrul. Prof. Hazarika, a regular writes on women centric issues finds in all these three novels elements of female exploitation and issues of women with a perceptive analysis of the conflicting attitudes in Birendra Bhattacharyya's writings. But what she concludes is that the novelist attempts to place women at the forefront. Analyzing the character of Sharengla , novelist writes: "... a woman needed a man whom her heart accepted.. a woman need a man's love as she needed the sky, the wind, the forest and the rivers" (*Iyaruvingam*, p.247). The historical significance of this novel is beyond dispute as the novelist traces the Naga life since the time when the British were yet to arrive in the Naga Hills and the Nagas were living independently as indigenous people. The bibliography and the chronology at the end of the book is quite impressive. The book cover that includes a photograph of the writer herself is simply superb. There are few mistakes and typo errors, but in the second edition all these may be corrected. They are no blemishes; excellent achievements make us forget the minor mistakes.