

Understanding Caste and Gender-Based Discrimination in Assamese Culture: A Study of Arupa Patangia Kalita's Doiboki's Day

Nova Deka

Independent Researcher, Delhi, India

Abstract

This research paper seeks to explore the issue of caste and gender-based discrimination in Assamese society and culture through a critical reading of Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story *Doiboki's Day*. This paper examines how deeply entrenched these discriminatory practices are within a patriarchal society by studying the character of Doiboki, the protagonist of Kalita's *Doiboki's Day*, who hesitates to seek refuge even in a sacred place due to the fear of transgressing such discriminatory societal norms, even at the face of death. The paper also attempts to study the consequences of defying the norms of society. The paper sheds light on the importance of standing up for oneself and raising one's voice against the injustices, rather than being mere victims of oppression. The issue of caste and gender-based discrimination is explored in this paper against the backdrop of the politically volatile period of insurgency in Assam. The paper also reflects on the egalitarian ideals of 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' which was propounded by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev in an attempt to establish a just and equal society. The paper draws upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality' to analyse how Doiboki is perpetually at a disadvantaged position in the society she is living in due to her identity as a so-called low caste woman from a lower-class background as she is just a fisherwoman. Through an analysis of Kalita's *Doiboki's Day*, the paper reflects on the broader realities of Assamese women's lived experiences in a patriarchal society, and how their struggles are further intensified amidst the period of insurgency in Assam. This paper argues that *Doiboki's Day* is a powerful literary work that strongly critiques the caste and gender-based discrimination in Assamese society.

Keywords: Insurgency in Assam, Caste based discrimination, Gender-based discrimination, Assamese society and culture, Patriarchal society, Double marginalisation, Neo-Vaishnavism, Naamghars, Women's resilience

Introduction

Doiboki's Day is a short story written by Arupa Patangia Kalita in Assamese. It is a part of her collection of short stories and a novella called *The Musk and Other Stories* which was first published in 2017. *Doiboki's Day* is originally penned in Assamese by Arupa Patangia Kalita and translated into English by Bonita Baruah. The author of the short story *Doiboki's Day*, Arupa Patangia Kalita, is an eminent Assamese short story writer, novelist, and academician. She was born in the Golaghat district of Assam in 1956. She is the author of several remarkably impactful books, many of which have been translated into English and several Indian languages. She has also translated the novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni

Morrison's first novel, into Assamese. Over the years, Arupa Patangia Kalita's works have received critical acclaim and made her win numerous literary awards such as the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award in 1995, the Prabina Saikia Award in 2012, etc. Moreover, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2014 for her collection of stories named *Mariam Austin Othoba Hira Barua*.

Kalita's narratives are not just literary compositions but are also insightful chronicles of the times she lives in. As a short story writer and novelist, she has an exceptional ability to create compelling narratives that reflect the experiences of her characters in the backdrop of the socio-political landscape of Assam. Her storytelling is imbued with a deep sense of place and history, making her a powerful writer in capturing the essence of Assamese culture and society. Her writing reflects upon the Assamese history and culture, and deals with themes such as gender, caste, and class issues in the Assamese society. Her works are predominantly set in the beautiful landscape of Assam and are intertwined with the state's historical and political issues. Moreover, she typically reflects upon and writes about the issues of women in her stories as well as the lives of lower- and middle-class people in Assam against the backdrop of the socio-political scenario of the state such as the issue of insurgency.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story, *Doiboki's Day*, is also set against the backdrop of insurgency. The North-East region of India has been affected a lot by the issue of insurgency. Insurgencies in the north-east states of India were the result of various reasons which caused a lot of social and political unrest in the region. The issue of insurgency started in Assam with the infiltration of a huge number of illegal migrants from the neighbouring country of Bangladesh (Kotwal, 2001) around the 1970s and 1980s. Different groups in the region are fighting for various causes such as demand for autonomy, and/or as a result of political marginalization, influx of illegal migrants, ethnic tensions, lack of infrastructure and economic development, etc. As a result of frequent incidents of guerrilla warfare, bombings and armed conflict in the region many people have lost their lives instilling a sense of fear and insecurity among the people living in the region. It is against this socio-political situation of militancy that the narrative of *Doiboki's Day* takes place.

At the very beginning of the story, the readers are informed about the socio-political landscape in which the narrative is set through the character named Joduram, a vegetable vendor. When Doiboki questions him about the absence of Gonesh, who has a makeshift shop of spices, Joduram replies, "How could he come? After they blew up the bridge with a bomb and killed the military men...the whole village is being trampled under the military" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 225). This made Doiboki feel anxious as she has to travel back home alone late at night. Moreover, it is because Doiboki spotted "three loaded military vehicles" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 229) on her way back home that she is compelled to enter the naamghar (Assamese prayer house and community hall) in order to save her life. And, it is through this very dilemma she faces of whether she should enter the naamghar or not that the prevailing caste and gender-based discrimination of the time in the Assamese society and culture gets explored in the narrative of the short story - *Doiboki's Day*.

The story's plot centres around its protagonist, Doiboki. She is a poor widowed low-caste fisherwoman struggling to make a living by selling fish and at the same time trying to save up money so that she can help pay for her mother-in-law's cataract surgery. The narrative opens by describing a typical day in Doiboki's life selling fish at the market and labouring till late in the evening to get a fair price for her fine fish which is filled with roe. Being a widow and a mother of two children, she had a lot of responsibilities on her shoulders. She had to take care of her old mother-in-law as well as provide for her two children.

Hence, she refused to sell her fine fish for a meagre amount and stayed back at the marketplace trying to get a reasonable price.

However, the incidents that occur on her way back home were not what she usually encountered. Hearing about the incident of what happened in Gonesh's village from Joduram, Doiboki gets anxious at that very moment as it had got dark and she had to walk back home all alone. It was not uncommon for her to hear about such incidents of militancy yet she started shivering with intense fear. Even so, she was contended that she had not made a loss that day and even after buying some rice and potatoes for her home she was able to save up some money. Thus, she starts walking back home tying her money in a tucked in knot of her Mekhela Chador (Assamese traditional dress) taking long strides to reach her home at the earliest.

Kalita presents a vivid description of Doiboki's anxiety while walking back home late in the evening. She is wearing a worn out mekhela chador without a petticoat and even some buttons of her blouse are missing. This reflects her grim state of destitution and sheer poverty. Under the streetlights, Kalita writes that Doiboki felt "naked and exposed" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 226) as people are leering at her. Kalita's depiction of Doiboki's discomfort and uneasiness illustrates Doiboki's helpless state of utter penury.

Being a woman and clad in clothes that barely covered her body, she felt quite unsafe and started praying to reach her village as soon as possible. Even the weather was getting extremely humid and unpleasant. She is all soaked up in sweat, walking fast to reach her home. She had almost reached the naamghar now beyond which is the bridge that led to her village. However, her relief upon seeing the bridge is soon faded away as she encounters three military vehicles on her way under the flash of lightning. Doiboki who is already weathered is now terror struck.

The sky is filled with fierce lightning and is resounding with thunderous echoes reflecting the tumult of anxiety and apprehension growing inside Doiboki's mind and heart. She faces the naamghar and prays "Lord, what have I got myself into today?" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 230). At that very moment, she hears some sounds of someone being tortured and put to death. She began trembling with fear and got into a state of panic. She heard the military men moving and coming near her. She needed to hide and seek sanctuary to save her life. The only safe spot in her vicinity was the naamghar. She, thus, reached out to the gates of the naamghar and poised her hands to open them. However, just as she was about to proceed, she abruptly stopped in hesitation.

Doiboki very well knew the norms of the society which restricted low caste people and women from entering the naamghar. Her hesitation to enter the naamghar arose from her fear of transgressing these norms. Since her childhood, she and her friends had only seen the naamghar from the outside, daring not to set foot inside the sacred place. It had always been their curiosity to know what exactly lay inside the sacred place where everyone bowed their head with great admiration and paid homage. But right now, she was in dire need of a place to hide and save her life. It was the question of life or death for her. Yet, she stood there in a dilemma about whether or not to enter the "sanctum sanctorum" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 234). Thus, Doiboki's predicament underscores the theme of caste and gender-based discrimination in the text. The events that follow henceforth in the narrative further accentuate this theme.

Exploring Caste and Gender-Based Discrimination in Assamese Society and Culture with Reference to the Text - *Doiboki's Day*

Literature is often considered to be a mirror of the society. Writers reflect the functioning and customs of the society in their works capturing the culture and traditions of the society. It often offers the writers a medium to highlight and critique the social evils, injustices and norms of the society. Readers can explore

and understand the culture of a particular society and the socio-political conditions of the age through various works of literature which are produced in that particular place and age. It provides the readers with an opportunity to interact and familiarize themselves with a society's history and culture by analysing works that serve as an echo of the way of life of the era and place in which it is produced. Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Doiboki's Day* is an exemplification of this as it is an example of a remarkable work of literature that deals with Assamese history and culture.

Kalita's *Doiboki's Day* presents before its readers a glance into the Assamese culture by telling the tale of a day in Doiboki's life. Kalita subtly critiques the caste and gender-based discrimination in Assamese culture and society through an incident in her short story where Doiboki finds herself in a conundrum in which she needs to enter the naamghar to save her life from the military men and the hailstorm. Doiboki is a widowed fisherwoman considered to be from the lower caste. Her caste, occupation and gender become the reason she falls into a dilemma before entering the naamghar which points towards the entrenched caste and gender-based discriminatory practices in the society she lives in.

The issue of discrimination based on caste, class, gender, religion, race, etc. is a phenomenon that almost every society deals with despite legal and social reforms to eradicate discrimination of any kind and to guarantee equality to every individual. This issue is faced by the Indian society too even after several social and political reform movements over the years. Discrimination based on caste and gender remains entrenched in the Indian society despite several reform movements. Caste based discrimination in India can be traced back to the hierarchical stratification of society into the four varnas – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In a news article published by *BBC News* in 2019 titled "What is India's caste system?" it is stated that this system "which divides Hindus into rigid hierarchical groups based on their karma (work) and dharma (the Hindi word for religion, but here it means duty) is generally accepted to be more than 3,000 years old" ("What Is India's Caste System?"). The people who were considered to be at the lowest rung of the ladder of caste hierarchy were the so-called untouchables. Discrimination based on caste led to social exclusion, economic disadvantages, less employment opportunities, etc. for the people considered to be from the lower castes.

Moreover, gender-based discrimination still remains a global phenomenon resulting in social, political and economic disadvantages for women. There have been several attempts at bringing gender equality in societies all over the world, but the issue of discrimination based on gender still remains a pervasive concern. Patriarchal systems which reinforce the superiority of men and provide them with powerful positions in the society to control women have relegated the women to an inferior position as compared to the men in the society. This also leads to institutionalised gender roles, often putting the women in a disadvantaged position. Women are considered to be the subordinates of men and are denied equal rights. Women are deprived of equal educational and employment opportunities. They are paid unequal wages for the same work as done by men as well as are denied leadership and decision-making roles. They are often expected to stay within the four walls of their house and do household chores. Female infanticide is also a grave issue which is closely linked with the gender prejudices.

Though several efforts have been made by social reformists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, etc. over the years to bring in change and annihilate these discriminatory practices against women and people belonging to the so-called lower castes, there still remains a lot to be done to bring equality in our society. Even the government has taken several legal and socio-economic measures in this regard and substantial progress has been made, yet continued efforts are needed to make our society achieve social justice and equality for all.

Several writers have taken up the theme of discrimination based on caste and gender in their works such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (2001) which was originally published in 1935, Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* (2021) which was originally published in 1995, Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* (2017) which was originally published in 2013, etc. Also, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2011), which was originally published in 1949, is a seminal work advocating for women's rights which laid the foundation for second wave feminism. Beauvoir discusses in her seminal essay that how women are always seen as the "other" in relation to men. (Beauvoir, 2011). She also talks about how women are relegated as inferior to men by the society. Thus, through literary works writers often portray the issues prevalent in the society for readers to analyse and become aware of them. Likewise, Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Doiboki's Day* presents before its readers a glimpse into the Assamese culture where Doiboki, the protagonist of the story, faces discrimination based on her caste and gender.

Doiboki, who is a fisherwoman, is denied access into the premises of the naamghar since her childhood. She had always seen the naamghar from the outside but was not allowed to go inside it to pray. When she was young, she and her friends at times would come and sit outside the naamghar and the ladies after singing their devotional songs in the open area of the naamghar would come and offer Doiboki and her friends the prasad in a banana leaf, and even inquire Doiboki about the fish to buy from her. Also, Doiboki had heard that in the compound of the naamghar there were two ponds, Ganga and Jamuna, where two huge turtles called Doiboki and Jashoda were said to be living. This always made her wonder did her mother really named her after that pond turtle about whom she had only heard of but never seen as she was forbidden to enter the premises of the naamghar.

Moreover, Kalita in her story *Doiboki's Day* presents the readers with a description of the naamghar. Naamghar is a place of worship in Assamese community that was established by the Assamese saint-scholar, Srimanta Sankardev. People gather here to perform various religious and cultural activities, and sing devotional songs which are called 'naam'. Kalita, in her story, writes about the vast compound of the naamghar, the ponds, and the banyan tree which were all out of reach for people like Doiboki who were considered low castes. Women too were denied access into the sanctum sanctorum as Kalita writes in her story, "Women were not allowed to set foot in the naamghar, they kneeled in prayer on the steps itself" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 229). Also, Doiboki says in the story "The dark-as-plum people who went about carrying the smell of fish on them were forbidden to enter the naamghar" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 228) These statements in the story help the readers to unveil the underlying theme of caste and gender-based discrimination in the story's plot. The readers are made aware of the well-established norm of prohibiting the women and so-called low caste people from entering the naamghar. The story's plot develops around this theme of caste and gender-based discrimination. Moreover, the rising action of the story is also driven by this pressing issue presented by Kalita in her story. Thus, the theme of caste and gender-based discrimination is central to the story.

Furthermore, it is apparent in the story that the societal norm of restricting women and the so-called low caste people from entering the naamghar is so ingrained in the characters of the story that their actions are regulated and administered by the need to uphold this norm as well as by the fear of not adhering to this norm and the consequences that such a transgression would lead to. Doiboki hesitates a lot and falls into a dilemma before daring to enter the naamghar even when her life is at stake. There are military men coming in her direction and the only haven in her proximity is the naamghar, yet the fear of transgressing the societal norm stops her from setting foot inside the naamghar. The stormy weather with thunder and lightning reflects her inner fear which she battles boldly and makes the audacious move to enter the

naamghar. The thought that who would take care of her old mother-in-law and her two children if she is dead is more intimidating for her than the fear of the repercussions that she would have to face as a consequence of entering the naamghar.

However, as it transpires, the events that follow after Doiboki enters the naamghar turn out to be unfavourable and catastrophic for her. Her transgression is evidently not at all accepted by the villagers. Thus, through the character of Doiboki and the unusual events in a usual day of her life, Kalita subtly points towards the entrenched caste and gender-based discrimination prevalent in the Assamese society and culture.

Furthermore, Kalita's *Doiboki's Day* can be seen as a critique of the entrenched caste and gender-based discrimination prevalent in Assamese society which permeates its command over the cultural and religious institutes like the naamghar too. Although, unlike in other parts of India, this social evil of discrimination based on caste, class, creed, gender, etc. is less prominent in Assam, yet, it still poses a concerning issue for the inhabitants over the centuries and acts as a barrier in the growth and development of the region. Several efforts have been made by many social reformists over the years to eradicate this social evil. Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev, Bhupen Hazarika, Chandraprabha Saikiani, etc. are some well-known names who devoted their lives to bringing about social change in Assam and worked to establish a classless, fair and just, democratic society for all sections of people.

It was Srimanta Sankardev who established the naamghars and Sattras as important socio-cultural and religious institutions with an aim to promote and bring into being an egalitarian society. Bhriyumoni Nath and Dr. Debojit Konwar in their research article titled "Neo-Vaishnavite Movement; A Social Renaissance to Enlighten the Egalitarian Outlook of Assamese" (2022) write that Srimanta Sankardev propagated the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam during the 15th century (Nath and Konwar, 2022). Srimanta Sankardev's aim was to stop the socio-cultural degradation of the people of Assam. Earlier, the lower caste people and the so-called untouchables lived a miserable life and faced severe discrimination because of the stratification of the society on the basis of castes. In many households of Assam, women also led a deplorable life because of the deep-rooted patriarchal structure of the society which relegated her to a subordinate and inferior position as compared to her male counterpart. The plight of the downtrodden and marginalised people was growing. It was because of severe discrimination that they faced based on their caste, class, gender, race, religion, etc. Such discriminatory practices needed to be eradicated from the society. Women were the worst affected. They were doubly marginalised: first because of their gender and second if they belonged to a low caste. Women, because of being constant victims of double marginalisation by the patriarchal society, did not enjoy the same kind of freedom and rights in the society. Moreover, Lalit Sonowal in his research article title "Neo- Vaisnavism and the Status of Women in Assam" states that "Vaishnava reformers like Madhavadeva, who advocated Puritanism, considered women as a source of temptation and therefore passed derogatory comments on women" (Sonowal, 2019). Thus, the advent of Srimanta Sankardev and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam brought with itself a ray of hope for these oppressed and exploited sections of society.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev worked relentlessly to establish and promote an egalitarian society. It is based on the doctrine of 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' which refers to surrendering oneself completely to the devotion of one Supreme Being. According to this doctrine, elaborate and complex religious rituals, and idol worshipping are not to be performed. Rather, the followers of the 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' immerse themselves in deep devotion to one deity, Lord Krishna, through chanting his name.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev also established Sattras and naamghars which upheld the notion of an ideal society based on equality. Daisy Barman in her article titled “Faith, Caste Hierarchy and Exclusion in the Vaishnava Sect in Assam” (2022) writes that naamghar was considered to be “a symbol of egalitarianism” (Barman, 2022). The naamghar is a community prayer hall that also acts as a democratic space for the people to gather and discuss their socio-economic issues as well as a place for organising meetings to address any issue related to the village community and/or to discuss and take decisions related to the village development and for the well-being of all the villagers. People belonging to all castes, class and tribes were permitted to enter these cultural and religious institutions with an aim to promote equality and fraternity among all irrespective of their social status in the community making it a highly inclusive place of worship. Borgeets are sung as well as Bhaonas are performed in the naamghars which were quite popular and fostered a sense of solidarity among all the followers of ‘Eka Sarana Nama Dharma’.

Women too were given the liberty to participate in the activities of the naamghars. However, women were not given the same kind of social status and importance as men. The management positions within the organisation of the naamghar were usually given to men. Yet, women were allowed to organise their own ‘naam prasangas’ (chanting of devotional songs and prayers). Also, at times women met at the naamghar to discuss their issues and seek advice and help from each other. Thus, women were given limited access and participatory roles. The limited and restricted participation of women in naamghars can be attributed to prevailing gender biases, and patriarchal norms and beliefs. However, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev worked towards redeeming and uplifting the position of women in society by establishing naamghars that created a relatively accessible spiritual space for women, which was quite progressive for his time.

However, over the years, the preachings and egalitarian ideals of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma have gradually been diluted as Assamese society became increasingly stratified and diverse. Brahmanical teachings gradually entered the region’s religious and social life, reinforcing notions of ‘purity and pollution’ associated with the caste system. These beliefs eventually found their way and started encroaching into the naamghars of Assam as well, contradicting the inclusive vision of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev. For instance, in a news article titled “After Sabarimala, why not Barpeta Satra?” by Parvin Sultana published in 2018, Sultana writes about how women were prohibited from entering the kirtanghar of Patbausi Satra in Barpeta district of Assam as menstruating women are considered as ‘impure’ and ‘unclean’ (Sultana, 2018). This reflects what Uma Chakravarti defines as “Brahmanical patriarchy” (Chakravarti, 1993) in her work titled “Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State” (1993), and stands in stark contrast to the original teachings of Neo-Vaishnavism. Thus, such incidents of caste and gender-based discriminatory practices have entered and made their place in many of the Sattras and naamghars over the years, with the impetus of being in a male dominant society where the females are always subjugated and dominated by men. These discriminatory practices, however, have no foundation in the original egalitarian philosophy of Srimanta Sankardev as he did not impose such restrictions on women when he established the Sattras and naamghars.

Therefore, it is such discriminatory practices based on caste and gender that Arupa Patangia Kalita subtly critiques in her story *Doiboki’s Day*. The readers can get a glimpse of how debilitating such discriminatory practices can get for its victims. Doiboki, who is in a helpless state, first falls into a dilemma before entering the naamghar in the face of death, and even after she seeks refuge, she has to endure the tormenting consequences of her transgression in a weathered state solely based on the prejudices the society holds against her caste and gender.

Kalita not only sheds light on the entrenched caste and gender-based discrimination in Assamese society and culture but also lays before her readers an example through her short story *Doiboki's Day* of how sometimes the victims of such discriminatory practices too have ingrained within themselves the feeling of being an outcast. Doiboki is well aware of the prohibition on women and low caste people to enter the naamghar. Thus, when she enters the naamghar upon having no other way to save her life, she is overwhelmed with deep fear and panic. She is drenched in sweat and is thirsty yet she hesitates to drink water from the Ganga-Jamuna. She becomes way too anxious about polluting the naamghar with her foul stench of fish. Moreover, her belief in many of the tales circulating in her village such as the appearance of a golden boat at the pond of the naamghar which is said to be possessed by an evil spirit and whosoever sees it would be dead, intensified her apprehensions so much so that she actually starts to feel that what she had heard about the golden boat is actually happening in reality with her and she is going to die. She starts feeling she has committed a sin due to her audacious act of entering the naamghar. The ingrained acceptance of being an outcast in the eyes of the society makes Doiboki feel she is a sinner for seeking refuge in the sacred naamghar to save her life. This makes the readers ponder over a fundamental question: whether upholding caste, class, gender and other such social divisions which are discriminatory in nature, is more important than protecting one's life.

However, Arupa Patangia Kalita not only writes about Doiboki's ordeals that follow upon entering the naamghar. In fact, Kalita also portrays a paradigm of fortitude through Doiboki's character who speaks up for herself showing resilience to the society's prejudices against her gender and caste. The next morning of Doiboki's transgression, she is persecuted by the people when they find her inside the naamghar. She is not even given a chance to speak and explain what led to her transgression. She is just seen as a low caste fisherwoman who has dared to enter the sacred naamghar and 'pollute' it. People are appalled and all sorts of myths that people believe in add on to Doiboki's misery. People start saying things like "Now our country's sure to burn" (Kalita, 2017, pp. 237), and belief in many such other forebodings abound in the minds of the people witnessing a low caste woman inside the naamghar. As a consequence of their belief in such myths, they became even more enraged and started hurling abuses at Doiboki followed by mob lynching under the pretext of vigilante justice.

A Comparative Study of *Doiboki's Day* and Other Texts

Moreover, when Doiboki's hard-earned money fell off from the knot in her mekhela chador, she is accused of being a thief. She is also accused of stealing the silver and golden flowers from the naamghar. The incident of Doiboki being falsely accused of theft and being discriminated against on the basis of her caste and gender reflects the regressive mindset of the society which augments Doiboki's cause of agony. This incident can roughly be compared with what happens with Will Mayes in William Faulkner's short story *Dry September* (1931). Will Mayes, who is a black man in the American South, is accused of sexually assaulting Minnie Cooper, a white unmarried woman. Since Will Mayes is a black man in the American South, he is presumed to be guilty without any evidence because of the entrenched issue of racial prejudice in the community he lived. He is lynched by a mob of white men without any evidence solely on the basis of a rumour which points towards the underlying theme of social injustice which permeates in his community because of the deep-rooted issue of racism. Both Doiboki and Will Mayes face persecution without any evidence under the pretext of vigilante justice, and are subjected to social injustice in their respective communities. This shows every society is grappling with some or the other social evil which needs to be eradicated for establishing equality for all - in the case of Doiboki, it is her caste, class and

gender which leads to discrimination against her, and in the case of Will Mayes it is the issue of racial hatred and prejudice.

Doiboki worked hard and earned her own living, and upon being accused of theft she was left shattered. Her sufferings are heightened because of her social as well as economic standing in society. The fact that she is a poor woman belonging to a low caste community is the only identity marker that the vigilante mob needed to persecute her. However, Doiboki does not remain silent. She does not passively endure the physical and verbal abuses of the people. She speaks up for herself against the injustice she is being subjected to.

Kalita portrays Doiboki as a revolutionary figure at the end of the story. Doiboki confidently takes a stand for herself and makes radical statements in her defence, “I am a woman. I am impure. I’ve carried a child in my womb. I am a fisherwoman... I have sinned by entering the great naamghar. But I am not a thief...” (Kalita, 2017, pp. 240). Her statements clearly convey that in the eyes of the society she might be an outcast which she has somewhat inherently accepted herself too yet she is reluctant to accept the false charges of theft against her. She again tries to reason out her cause of transgression but the mob simply starts attacking her. By then, Doiboki’s villagers had also got to know about her whereabouts and were standing right at the threshold of the naamghar when they saw her being battered by the vigilante mob. What makes Kalita’s short story even more revolutionary is that the story ends with Doiboki’s family and the other people from her village also entering the naamghar to save her. This is quite groundbreaking as they all collectively defy the social norm of being prohibited from entering the naamghar which they have been following since their childhood. Doiboki and her villagers together fight against the regressive and narrow-minded upper caste people. The story ends with Doiboki’s old mother-in-law saying, “...let’s see who dares do anything to you... The old lady is not dead yet, Doiboki” (Kalita, 2017, pp. 240). Through this incident, Kalita subtly points towards the importance of collective efforts of the oppressed over the years to break free from the injustices of the society, and this still remains an ongoing struggle for many. Moreover, Doiboki’s character slightly resonates with the characteristics of a “New Woman”, a term popularised by Sarah Grand in her article titled “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (1894). Much like the character of Nora Helmer who is quintessentially a “New Woman” (Grand, 1894) presented by Henrik Ibsen in his play *A Doll’s House* (1879), Doiboki too challenges the patriarchal structure of the society by her act of raising her voice against the unjust prejudices and discriminatory behaviour of the society. Both Doiboki and Nora courageously speak for themselves and defy the patriarchal norms of the societies in which they respectively live. Both Nora and Doiboki’s characters advocate for a change in a gender biased society. Nora takes the bold step to leave her husband and her children behind. The play ends with the loud sound of slamming the door while Nora is leaving her husband’s house, thereby, symbolically breaking free from the constraints of her marriage where she is treated like a ‘puppet’. Similarly, Doiboki stands up against her ostracization by the society as well as the false charges of theft she is accused of without any trial in the court of law, thereby, symbolically raising her voice against the injustices inflicted upon her by the traditional patriarchal society, and, hence, advocating for a social change.

As a matter of fact, many of Arupa Patangia Kalita’s women protagonists are known for their outspoken nature against the injustices of the society. Her works more often than not deal with the struggles of women trapped in the clutches of patriarchy and their attempt to venture into challenging it. Thus, Kalita strives to redefine women’s social and economic position in society in her works with a pervasive underlying theme of bringing in a social change for the development of all. As Kalita said advocating for women’s

improved social status in an news article published in *The Week* with the title “Assam strives to tell its tales” by Karishma Saurabh Kalita, “Offer them a society where they will be safe and free, then see miracles will happen.”

Kalita has, in fact, penned down several incredible women characters who defy the societal norms and attempt to break through the barriers imposed on them by the male-centric society. Kalita’s powerful writings and portrayal of dauntless women who speak up when they are subjugated under male dominance reflect Kalita’s feminist outlook. For example, Mainao is a female character in Arupa Patangia Kalita’s short story *The Girl with Long Hair* from her collection of short stories called *Written in Tears* (2015). Mainao undergoes immense pain and suffering as a result of her not following the diktat of the society. She tries to resist the punishment she is given for her disregard for the society’s diktat but in vain (Kalita, 2015). Also, Binapani is a bold female character portrayed by Kalita in her novel *Dawn* (2005) who is brave enough to question the patriarchal system and strives to break free from its clutches and emerge as an independent woman (Kalita, 2005).

Conclusion

Hence, Arupa Patangia Kalita with her feminist perspective writes stories of oppression, violence, women’s suffering, etc. with her brilliant imagination. She weaves her stories with vivid descriptions of the beautiful landscape of Assam, and at the same time, also makes her readers aware about the socio-political issues such as insurgency embroiling in the state. She writes her stories bearing close resemblance with reality and subtly critiques the society’s injustices against several marginalised communities such as the so-called low caste people and women.

Thus, through Arupa Patangia Kalita’s short story, *Doiboki’s Day*, the readers are made aware of the issue of discrimination based on caste and gender which permeates in Assamese society and culture. She skilfully integrates history and socio-political issues of the state in her story by setting her plot against the issue of insurgency as the backdrop of the text, thereby, exploring how one’s environment impacts the lives of the common people living under such tumultuous and volatile situations.

Moreover, Kalita also throws light on how the “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989) of a person’s social identities such as gender, class and caste in the case of Doiboki exacerbates her situation by aggravating her issues. Hence, the analytical framework of “intesectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989) given by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) can be used to study and understand how women living in a patriarchal society are subjected to oppression and subjugation which is heightened if they belong to the marginalised communities of a society or are from a low class. Their situation is further aggravated in times of politically turbulence like what happens with Doiboki in Kalita’s *Doiboki’s Day*.

Doiboki, however, refuses to be a mere victim of her circumstances. Doiboki, who is a mother and the sole earner of her family, stands as a figure of resistance who raises her voice against the injustices meted out against her along with her villagers who take her stand and fight for her, rather than being silenced and being buried under the pain and sufferings inflicted by the discriminatory practices of the society in which she lives in, thereby, igniting the flame in many other oppressed people like her to keep fighting for their rights and for an equal society for all. The story ends with a subtle hint at the importance of the collective efforts of people to bring in a social change. Without solidarity and a fervour for justice and equality for

all, no social movement can be successful in bringing a change for the betterment of the society and progress for all.

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