



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)
UGC Approved Journal (SL NO. 2800)
Volume-III, Issue-VI, May 2017, Page No. 183-193
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Motherhood in Colonial India with Special Reference to Assam

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Abstract

The concept of motherhood is very interesting topic for research. Matriarchy and the concept of matrilliny are closely related to it. Different scholars of the globe placed their thoughts regarding the status of mothers in early societies. However in this paper, attempt has been made to study the concept of motherhood in colonial India with special reference to Assam. Motherhood happens to be a integral part of domestic life and as the new mode of administration brought various new elements like print media, western education, western cultural influence into Indian societies, the domestic lives of Indian families had been gone through various changes. So as in Assam too. Women were not given due importance but women as a mother often got an attention as they are the creator of next generation. Therefore, attempt has been made to study the traditional birth practices of Assam and the intervention of western medical service and its related politics in the state. Moreover, effort has been made to study the changing status of motherhood in colonial Assam. As, the Assamese society was composed of brahmanical as well as non-brahmanical tradition, so effort has been made to study accordingly. The study has been preceded with mainly primary sources and secondary sources are also used.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Dhai, Colonial India, Nationalism, Sexual division of labor.*

Introduction: Anthropologist like Briffault and Bachofen on the basis of their study of different cultures and their symbolic systems claimed that the original human society was matriarchal. Anthropologist L.H. Morgan was also of the opinion that mother at the very early stages of society earned a good amount of autonomy which he called “mother right”, but due to the changing mode of production maternal responsibility ceased as an alibi to exclude a women from power, authority, and decision and from a participatory role in public life¹. Engels in his book `Origin of the family, Private property and the State`, also accepted the opinion of Morgan. He too believed the existence of mother right in earlier times, but rejecting the mythical explanation connected it to economic systems which created social organization of relations of productions². The displacement of mother right by father right accompanied the emergence of class society and private wealth.

Nevertheless, regarding matrilineal and matriarchy there is a continuous debate among scholars of different discipline. Even some scholars like Kathleen Gough dismiss the theory of an earlier matriarchy as sheer fantasy. Matrilineal descent had always existed and still does in several parts of the world. According to her this phenomenon was specific response in horticulture societies where the work of women was a key to survival³. The child-bearing role and the cultural elaboration of differences in strength between men and women might have led to the subordination of women. But in our discussion the focus will be upon motherhood and how was it taken by society of India as well as Assam.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the paper are to find out:

- ❖ The prevailed idea on motherhood in colonial India as well as in Assam.
- ❖ The traditional birth practices in brahmanical and non-brahmanical society of Assam.
- ❖ The impact of western medical intervention on mothers and children.
- ❖ Reaction of newly educated Assamese middle class males towards the concept of motherhood.
- ❖ The changing status of mothers in colonial Assam.

Methodology: In order to prepare the paper, data which are essential basically collected from primary sources like journals, newspapers, magazines and other literary sources of colonial period that are available. Secondary sources like research journals, unpublished research thesis, books are also used. To interpret the data, analytical method has been used.

Discussions and Findings: Right from the time of Harappan Civilisation, India has a tradition of worshipping mother figure. This is the only country in the world today where the goddess is worshiped as the great mother in a tradition that dates back to the Bronze Age. In Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas we got enormous evidence of female figurines. All of them combine aspects of fertility and nurturance with that of dynamic virgin warrior. Each mother goddess has her own weapon and mounts - she is the protector who vanquishes evil. Now the question is – if in ancient literature the mother goddess were portrayed with valour and courage then what was its impact on mothers of modern India?? While searching the answer of this question a number of issues come into focus. The mother, is she the master of her own womb? Is she attains same status while give birth to female child? What respect she earns in her husband`s family as a mother of male child or female child?

19th century Bengal was the platform of various newer and newer thoughts. Regarding women, it was seen that, two trends were going simultaneously parallel in Bengal. One is the trend of revivalist thinkers who supposed to have set the clock back for women in colonial India. The second one is the reformist group who started an era with vigorous protests against overt oppression of women in the form of child marriage, perpetual widowhood for the upper caste Hindu women and sati system but considered motherhood in a very positive light. From the writings of those reformists like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, it was seen that they use to eulogies their mothers;

motherhood was seen as the ultimate identity of Bangali women. In Assam regarding women, a number of issues and debates were going on in late 19th and early 20th century. But how was the motherhood taken by the person that is not clear. A number written sources are available in this period from which we can assume some ideas regarding the concept of motherhood in late 19th century and early 20th century, Assam.

Traditional birth practice and suggested reforms: In Assamese societies the new born child is considered as the medium of strong bonding in between the mother and other members of the in-law's family. In colonial Assam it was seen that, for the married girls, after attainment of puberty pregnancy was not a choice but their only option. She was not asked whether she has the mental set up and physical ability to bear a child in her womb or not. This attitude of the society can be explained by citing an example of a renowned lady of 20th century Assam, Nirmalprava Bordoloi. Her personal experience as narrated in her autobiography. When Nirmalprabha Bordoloi became pregnant at the mere age of 13-14 despite of her objection, her father questioned his son-in-law about this injustice. He replied "My wife, my wish. I shall do whatever I want to do with her"⁴. Even in her autobiography Nirmalprabha Bordoloi has given lots of example of such situation faced by her aunts, cousins etc for which she wrote that in those days pregnancy was not depend upon women's will or choice. Without uttering a single word she has to give birth children in every year and hence a lady has to give birth 12-14 children. As a result she has to suffer in anaemic disease and other internal disease. Moreover to benefit from the reverence for maternity, it was necessary for women to begin having children, shortly after marriage. Despite the discomforts, pregnancy may have been welcomed by a young bride, as it was a time when she was treated with grater care and affection than usual.

In 19th and 20th century, child bearing was very hazardous and painful in all parts of the world so as in Assam too. The issue of child birth did not receive much attention in the traditional medical science of Ayurveda in India. Child birth was considered as unclean event and the attitude of high caste *vaidya* or *hakim* were reluctant to interfere in the event. At the time of child birth, the pregnant mother was kept in a room called *cherasali* or *aturghar*⁵. The term *cherasali* was basically used in Upper Assam and it was not a separate room for the purpose of child birth, rather a part of the bedroom was used for this purpose and that part was called *cherasali*, but in Lower Assam, a separate room was there for the purpose of parturition and that room was called *Aturghar*. Cultural contact of Lower Assam with Bengal perhaps brought this word *Aturghar* into Lower Assam. Kanaklata Chaliha, the secretary of first Assamese women magazine *Ghar Jeuti*, was so worried about the frequent death of infant. In *Ghar Jeuti* she wrote an article *Sishu Mangal*, where she praised the ancient system of child birth in *Sutikagriha* where fire, betel leave and other materials were kept as sacred items for the benefit of the mother. But she retaliated that, with the passes of time the very concept of *Sutikagriha* had changed into an excluded, dark, dirty, unhygienic small room⁶. Cecilia Van Hollen pointed out that both the colonial and nationalist depicted the existing deplorable condition of the child birth in India in 19th and 20th century but though subject was same object was different. Colonial group used the matter of childbirth

to legitimize their rule in this country to protect the women and children and tended to criticize the tradition and custom of India whereas nationalist group blamed the colonial government extractive economic policies and unequal distribution of health services for the deplorable condition of childbirth⁹. Though Kanaklata Chaliha praised the traditional practice but she could not bring to that second group as she was seemed highly impressed with the childcare of Europe. She gave example of Bradford of London where hospitals for pregnant ladies and day care centres were available and hence she urged that this sort of facilities should be available in Assam also⁷. From the article *Sishu Mangal* the expectation of Assamese middle class people regarding childbirth and childcare can be easily accessible. But in actual practice in pre-independence period of Assam it was seen that in *cherasali*, the mother was made to sleep in the floor plastered with cow dung and the bed on floor was matted with hay or rice straw. Fire of husk was always kept ready to warm the body of both mother and the new born baby as well as to ward off the evil spirits. As in Hindu religion a physical embodiment of the impurity associated with child birth, so the mother and the new born baby was kept in seclusion and after one month, a purification ceremony used to celebrate. In non caste Hindu society, the practice of child birth is alike the caste Hindu society but some rituals are notably different. The believe of ritual impurity is also there in the non caste Hindu society but after the detachment of the cord, the baby is taken out from *cherasali* and after doing all the cleanliness activities the baby and the mother are blessed by aged ladies of the society. But at the same moment we have to say that due to continuous process of Brahmanisation a number of non caste Hindu society give up their traditional practices and rituals relating to child birth and in present time due to cultural assimilation caste Hindu societies also abandoned some rituals with the passes of time.

Role of Dhais in the Process of Childbirth in Traditional Assamese Society: In 19th century colonial Assam delivery was generally done at home and in that process, the crucial role was played by the *dhais*. Nirmalprabha Bordoloi in her autobiography noted that two or three *dhais* were brought to their home to help in the process of childbirth¹³. Using the *dhai* in child birth was something very much crucial as *dhais* were not properly trained. The *dhais* learnt their work without any formal training. Attended by the *dhai* in delivery relates a number of issue. Firstly, the caste status and position of those *dhais* in society, their knowledge and efficiency in childbirth and its results and most importantly to what extent midwifery was popular in Assam. While coming to the first issue i.e. caste status and position of the *dhai* in society we have seen that mostly the *dhais* belong to low caste. In Bengal, she was generally a *handi* or *dom*, in North India, she was generally a *chamar* or of sweeper community⁸. But in Assam no such references have been found about the caste of the *dhais*. The primary role of the *dhai* was thought to be the removal of ritual “pollution” associated with childbirth. The cutting of the umbilical cord and the disposal of the placentas and blood and giving the infant regular massage and warm fomentation are the primary tasks performed by the *dhais*. The second issue is the efficiency and skill of the *dhais*. The skill and knowledge of the *dhais* or midwives was a matter of continuous

discussion not only in Assam but also in Europe. It was seen that in 19th century Europe midwives were not taken as honourable one. Cecilia Van Hollen mentions that in Europe female healers were accused of witch-craft by the emergent elite male biomedical establishment as early as the 13th century, when medicine was becoming a secular science and profession⁹. By the 17th and 18th centuries, midwives were signalled out as danger to society. In the pages of *Ghar Jeuti*, we have seen a number of fear and suspicion in using *dhais* in child birth. Kanaklata Chaliha was very much sceptic about the skill of traditional *dhais* and she considered *dhais* as the prime cause of infant mortality¹⁰. In her article *Sishu-Mangal* she therefore asked people to set up *dhai* training centers in Assam. The attitude of educated class of Assam towards traditional *dhais* had been reflected in the Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya's writing while he used the adjectives – “dirty, uneducated” for *dhais*¹¹. Nevertheless, he used those terms seeing the ongoing condition of childbirth and *dhais*. In 20th century Assam, we have seen that the use of Khasi Nurse and Bangali midwives by aristocrat families. Padmanath Gohain Barua's only son Soren was born in the year 1924 and this obstetrics was done by midwife Kanaklata Ghosh¹². In early 20th century Assam doctors were not so available. Only a microscopic minority of Assamese elite cared to take assistance from Allopathic Doctors. Here we can mention the name of Anandaram Dhekial Phukon, Gunabhiram Baruah etc. Anandaram Dhekial Phukon appointed an Allopathic doctor named Sitala Singha to deal with the problems of his family and for maternity care of his wife¹³. In her autobiographical novel *Swarnalata*, Tilottama Mishra has also mentioned about appointment of allopathic doctor, midwives and *dhais* by Gunabhiram Baruah for maternity treatment of his wife¹⁴. Due to lack of proper medical facilities, trained *dhais*, social taboo against women visiting a male doctor, lack of women doctors, puerperal sepsis and anaemia, a number of women died in pregnancy cases in colonial Assam. On the other hand, the prevalent practice of child marriage and consummation immediately after puberty was another major reason behind high maternal and infant mortality. The practice of cutting the umbilical cord with dirty instrument (e.g., a piece of split bamboo), and of applying cow dung ashes to the freshly cut wound commonly resulted in tetanus-neonatarum and caused a very large number of deaths among healthy infants every year. Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya's autobiography narrated a number of incidences are described where the mother had to lose her life in delivery. As he mentioned that the other family members had accepted the suffering and death of the mother as the fate of the individual. That is why in Assamese society some popular proverbs are there like- *purosh more rone, tiruta more piyone*. Means males dies in war, females dies in delivery.

Child Rearing: In pre-independence period of Assam, some section of writers used to write a number of articles advising mothers how to build a healthy and enlightened generation. In the first Assamese women magazine *Ghar Jeuti*, many articles were devoted to infant management and treatment of child by modern as well as traditional methods. Children have a close bonding with their mother and other women of the family. It is seen that Assam has a tradition of joint family, so the children of a particular family is taken care or look after by a group of mothers and naturally grown up in a very caring atmosphere. The famous lady

Missionary Mrs. Moore in her book 'Twenty years in Assam' examined the domestic life of Assamese people and regarding child care she expressed that, "parents generally loved their children with a love that is fond and often unwise. Children drinking in falsehood and deception from their earliest days. Obedience is uncommon. Cruel and undeserved punishment is alternated with a fondling love that is so tender it cannot bear to hear the child cry, while the child has no idea of right and wrong conduct"¹⁵. From various writing of different writers we come to know that mother was made solely responsible for the formation of character and behaviour of the child. Dr. Mahananda Baruah wrote a number of notes in *Ghar Jeuti* about the health of child and mother¹⁶. Homeopathic doctor Durga Prasad Majinder Baruah also wrote article named *Kesuwa Aru Powoti* in *Ghar Jeuti*. Both the writer gave importance to proper breast feeding for a healthy baby. Both traditional wisdom and modern advice shared the view that all mothers should breast feed. New writers advised women to systematize breast feeding in a quasi scientific manner, but warned them against giving it up altogether. Dr. Mahananda Baruah Sahitya Bhushan gave detail advice about how a mother should feed her baby¹⁷. According to Dr. Baruah, Assamese mothers were guilty not of neglecting the feeding of the child, but of breast feeding it too frequently and weaning it too late. It was seen that in 20th century Assam too, there was a frequent increase in infant and maternal mortality rate. So Kanaklata Chaliha translate a number of articles from Bengali Magazine *Matri Mandir* into Assamese and published it in *Ghar Jeuti* where she asked mothers to breast feed their children regularly which would maintain the health of the baby as well as the mother¹⁸. Apart from the females the educated Assamese males also wanted some improvement in the traditional health practice related to mothers and child. In late 19th century, a prominent Assamese of lower Assam, Gobindaram Choudhury was highly concerned about the health of village mothers. Gobindaram Choudhury had some traditional *kabiraji* knowledge and to spread the medical awareness among rural ladies regarding health care of the children as well as of herself, he translated the book *Dhatri Siksha* of 'Mahatma Jadunath' written in Bengali into Assamese. The book *Dhatri Siksha* was concerned with the health of pregnant mothers and new born babies. Gobindachandra Choudhury named his translated book as *Sutika Potol*¹⁹.

Another important aspect of child rearing is the formation of child's behaviour and character. The autobiographies and other literary works of 20th century give a clear picture about how people become so much concern about the formation of child behaviour and character. Dharmeswari Devi Baruani in her speech delivered in *Joya Utsav* celebrated in Guwahati urged that mothers should become a good mother, good house maker and above all should be a mother of good son by attaining education. She urged all the Assamese mothers that, as in past, mothers could able to give birth heroes like Lachit Borphukan, chaste ladies like Sati Jaymati, Mula Gabharu and even in present time also patriotic son like Karmabir Deshpran Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, so now it is the time for Assamese mothers to give birth to able sons and make them healthy, full of good conduct and behaviour and a very patriotic one²⁰. Interestingly in writings of many Assamese writers, it is noticed that in 20th century Assam the concept of Napoleon's mother became so popular.

Dharmeswari Devi Baruani though devoid of higher education yet she urged Assamese mothers to be like the mother of Napoleon and believed that a wise son can be reared just only by an educated good mother²¹. It was noticed that both the section of writers give entire responsibility of formation of the behaviour of the children upon the mother. A series of article under title *Santanor Saritra Gathan* published in *Ghar Jeuti*²². This series of articles actually meant for the upcoming parents to give them the knowledge of parenting so that the children would become very good in conduct, would able to justify which is wrong and which is right and above all, would be able to serve the nation²³.

While in some other parts of India the practice of female infanticide was prevailed, in Assam, birth of girl child was not neglected, in fact many parents celebrate the birth of their girl child with huge pomp and show. Nirmalprabha Bordoloi was the first child of her parents and her birth was celebrated with huge community lunch arranged by her family²⁴. Nalinibala Devi's birth was welcomed by her family with warm wishes and love²⁵. It was seen that unlike other states of India, in Assam, the parents often considered their girl child as their pride and prestige. Person like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah felt prestigious with their daughters giving education, good conduct and domestic household knowledge. Padmashri Chnadraprova Saikiani dedicated her first published book *Pitribhitha* to her father by saying that her father was the person who believes in *dasaputra samakanya*, ten sons is equal to one daughter, who spent the whole life educating his daughters without taking out the difference in between son and daughter, whose scope of knowledge is immeasurable²⁶.

Though sexual division of labour, domination of patriarchy was there in the society yet girls were not neglected. However, to protect the line of patriliney, parents desired a male child. Padmanath Gohain Baruah in his autobiography wrote about his intense desire for a male child. He expressed that right from the time of the birth of their second child up to the seventh number, he wished a male child only but unfortunately his wish was not fulfilled. So at the age of 55 he read book of astrology, where a number of advice was given to give birth to a male child and he did accordingly. He expressed with bewilderment that accepting all those advices they could give birth to the 8th and the only male child²⁷. Gohain Baruah, as he noted that his entire life had changed after the birth of this child yet it is worth mentioned that he celebrated the birth of their first child which was girl with the same happiness. Giving birth to a male child brought special care, attention and love of the husband as well as the family members towards the mother. Women also felt blessed with the birth of male child. Unlike Bengal, in Assam, female infanticide was not recorded yet a male child always determined the status of a mother in the family. She always earns the respect as a mother rather than a separate entity.

Western Medical Intervention and Health of Mothers and Childrens: Concern for health care by the colonial administration was a general phenomenon in entire world. Two factors were there in health care of colonial authority. First, to give medical protection to their own officers and employers, second to legitimize their rule by protecting the "Vulnerable" members of the society, that is women and children from traditional medical

practice²⁹. The health of the children was a major issue in front of the British Govt. as well as Assamese people. Though in Assam, regarding mother and child's health, there were not any direct documents available but various autobiographies written during 19th and early decades 20th century give us a clear idea about the health condition of mother as well as the child. But by late 19th century the colonial as well as nationalist, both put attention on child health care. Articles regarding child's health published in numbers journals of that time and on the other hand Govt's initiatives had also brought a thin ray of hope for Assamese children. In the health magazine *Swasthya Prodip* published from Uzan Bozar, Guwahati in mid 20th century, a good numbers of articles written by medical professionals advising child's health care. Dr. Lalit Kumar Baruah wrote an article titled *Santanor Monubikash*, where he examined the child psychology³⁰.

Though lack of medical service, superstitious believes and lack of education was the main hurdles of child's health, unskilled *dhais* were the hurdle for child's health care. In Assam also Govt. took initiatives for *dhai* training. Under Dufferin Fund, financial assistance or scholarship for *dhai* training class was introduced in Berry White School of Dibrugarh. The scholarship offered by Dufferin Fund provided opportunity to Sushila Thomas to take medical education in Calcutta. She was the daughter of Baptist Mission's Pastor Charles Sonaram Thomas and the first Assamese lady Doctor who got the LMP degree in 1897.³¹ The Victoria Memorial Scholarship Fund represented the first systematic arrangement to retrain *dhais* throughout India. It was launched by Lady Curzon in 1901.³² Dufferin fund hospitals, clinics and dispensaries in the Districts became sites for this programme. In 1914 a *dhai* class room was opened at the Berry White Medical School and the classes were started with two Naga Girls, a coolie girl from one tea garden and nine local *dhais*³³. Arrangements were made to send pupils from Assam for training as nurse at the Lady Dufferin Hospital at Calcutta and in 1931, three girls were sent for such training³⁴. But no Assamese women got admitted into the classes.

The Lady Chelmsford All India League for maternity and child welfare was established in 1919, which co-ordinated the maternal and child benefits activities in all the provinces of British India. In connection with the league, a provincial centre was opened at Shillong in 1928 and it also contributed towards the development of the scenario of maternity and child welfare at that time. By 1940's trained nurses became available at Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Nagaon and Sivasagar³⁵. Though colonial Govt. took a few steps for maternity and child care yet it cannot be assumed that these few steps could able to eradicate the havoc of Assamese mothers and their children as those trained *dhais* were less in number and only accessible in urban areas.

Conclusion: The concept of motherhood and other issues relating to it had seen a gradual transformation in colonial Assam though in a slow step. The activities of women missionaries, some initiatives of the colonial government brought certain improvement in the health scenario of the women of the province. But these activities could hardly able to engulf every section of women of Assam. The colonial Govt. had failed to bring the western medical facilities to every nook and corner of the province. The chief hindrance to the

advancement of these works was ignorances, prejudices and partly poverty on the part of bulk of the population³⁶. The mortality rate among the infants was also very high. On the other hand the number of women doctor remained very few and though the Berry White Medical School was opened but women failed to take the medical profession due to the prevailing social and religious taboos. The first lady doctor of Assam was Dr. Sushila Thomas. Two other contemporary of Dr. Thomas were Dr. Durgabasini Das and Dr. Kusum Kumari Das. It was seen that by 1940`s a few more lady doctors cleared their M.B.B.S degree yet their number was very few in comparison to the women population of Assam.

Thus from above discussion it can be surmised that, the traditional birth practice with unskilled *dhais* having unhygienic instruments and unhygienic atmosphere had tasted a few changes in general. Only a few high class Assamese people had access to obstetrics with some trained midwives and new medical instruments like- stethoscope, x-ray, thermometer etc. So the medicalization of reproductive health remained incomplete during the colonial period. The situation has not changed substantially even after independence. Though the numbers of women availing medical attendance are increasing but due to number of factors including lack of infrastructure, large numbers of women are still deprived of proper medical care during child birth.

Apart from health care of mothers and children in pre-independence period, the attitude of the society towards the concept of motherhood was remained as same. The prominent scholars of 20th century Assam though mixed motherhood with nationalist sentiment but none of them have seen to praise their actual mothers in their writings. Mothers remained as a patriarch controlled entity in the society not having authority or control upon her body as well as womb.

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2. Ibid,p.13
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4. Cf. Nirmalprova Bordoloi, *Jiwan Jiwan Bor Anupam*, Jyoti Prakashan, guwahati, 2004, p.87.
5. A description of *Aturghar* was given by Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya in his autobiography; *Aturghar* is a dark, blocked, damp room where the mother had to give birth the child on a banana leave and sometimes attended by a dirty unskilled Dai.”- Gauri Shankar Bhattacharjya, *Sabinoy Nibedon*, Sahitya Prakash, Guwahati, 1999, p.15.

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20. Dharmeswari Devi Baruani, *Dharmeswari Devi Baruani Racanavali*, ed.Shila Borthakur.
21. *i.b.i.d*.
22. *Ghar Jeuti*, p.992.
23. *Ibid*, 1160.
24. Nirmalprova Bordoloi, *op.cit*,p.26
25. Nalinibala Devi,*op.cit*, p.12
- 26 "The personwho firmly believed in the doctrine of Monu`s "konya pora paloniya sikshya niyatee jatnatah" and his opinion about girl child was "Dasa putra sama kanya" (ten sons equal to one daughter) who never thought in word and action that girls were inferior to boys, in that time when women education was not prevalent and inconvenient , he put his daughters in hostels at distant for education, whose profound knowledge which I cannot measure even today, at my childhood who gave me economic, moral and spiritual lessons through storytelling, who is steady in forbearance, noble in forgiveness, kind hearted even towards his enemy, simple like a child, valiant and vigorous even at the time of danger, who is greatest one in my opinion, to that greatest preceptor, scholarly,loving, noble minded father, late Ratiram Maujadar`s gracious feet, this affectionate daughter (7th daughter, 10th child) dedicates her first published book Pitri Vitha as sacred price with honour from the core of her heart, as a tribute." Chandraprova Saikiani, *Pitribhita*.(trans. by self)
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30. *Swasthyo Prodip*, 10th issue, p.220.

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