

# Transition of Gender System through Time and Space: Case Study of a Tribal Group in Assam, India

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**Abstract-**In recent years gender study has assumed great significance in the context of large scale development planning the world over in general, and in developing countries in particular, involving the people irrespective of the sex bias. To make development a success, every social person's participation is necessary. But gender ideologies prevailing in a society have some determining effects on people's participation in developmental works. On the basis of gender ideology, the people segregate themselves in work spheres and in certain socio-cultural life-ways concerning their gender identity. For this reason the work role expectation of the two genders are never the same in the socio-cultural arena. Among the tribal societies this differential notion is considerably prominent. Thus the knowledge on gender relationship in a society is the prerequisites for any meaningful planning strategy. The study tries to find out the working of gender system among the sonowal Kacharis, a tribal group of Assam, in spheres encompassing their past and present social, cultural and physical environment and work role involvement etc.

**Keywords-**Gender, gender ideology, gender stratification, gender inequality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Gender defined

Gender refers to psychological, social and cultural components of a person. it is an achieved status because people learn what behaviour and attitude they should have according to their label, male and female. Each gender has culturally defined roles. Gender role is what one says and does to indicate others, and oneself, one's maleness or femaleness. It is the outward expression of one's subjective gender identity. In human societies, sex differences are experienced as gender. Therefore, the concept of gender is cultural interpretations of sex differences. Gender depends on how society views the relationship of male to men and female to women. Gender is an unalterable cognitive impression molded by culture of a given society. This unalterable cognitive impression creates a network of system in a society which can be termed as 'gender system'. Gender system includes the system of gender stratification and differentiation, as well as gender division of labour, gender social definition and power inequalities between the genders.

### B. Concepts relating to gender

Anthropological studies indicate that in almost all societies men and women do at least somewhat different kinds of works. These may overlap or totally segregate and in a few exceptions, the nature of what constitutes men's works versus women's varies cross culturally. Gender division of labour is rooted in the concept of gender differentiation. Adult males and females in most societies differ from one another, on average, in one or many types of traits: cognitive skills and styles, basic personality, emotional expression, self-concept, priorities among various social roles and so on. Males and females as individuals come to be gender differentiated by a process called 'engenderment'. In almost all societies, it is empirically established that female traits are devalued relatively to male traits through gender differentiation, though gender difference does not, conceptually, mean gender inequality. Gender division of labour affects and is affected by gender inequalities in every society. Then, there is something determinant in societies through which the tasks done by males come to be more highly valued and rewarded than those done by women. Thus we find the second universal fact about gender: perception of gender provides a basis for division of labour in all societies. Males and females in a society are not always equal in their access to the scarce and valued resources. We generally witness stratification among genders regarding access to scarce and valued resources. The extent of such access on the basis of gender identity is termed as 'gender stratification'. Gender inequalities increase along with increased gender stratification. Superior power can be established through the access to resources which are superior to the resources accessed by the group subordinate to the superior power group. Empirical studies indicate that gender stratification has always meant some degree of female disadvantages and superior power for men. Therefore, all systems of stratification are system of power inequality and system of gender stratification implies superior power for men. Scholars in social sciences have forwarded theories relating to the gender sub-ordination in societies. Among those theories the 'early adaptation theory' (Tiger: 1969, Ardrey: 1976), the 'technical-environmental theories' (Nonini: 1985, Divale and Haris: 1976, Leacock: 1981, Gaily: 1984), Socio-biological theories (Wilson: 1975), cultural but universal theories (Sacks: 1979) put emphasis on different aspects of gender stratification and gender subordination in societies.

Anthropologists argue that women's subordination is cultural but rooted in the gender division of labour (Goldelier: 1981; Ortner: 1974). Their view is that gender has symbolic association of women with nature and men with culture, where the later is superior to the former. For some, the gender subordination is a historical fact. For them women's status and authority are the highest in areas where economic and political stratification are the least developed (Bodley: 1982, Diamond: 1974). The view of most social scientists is that gender ideology is one of the root causes of legitimizing male power over women a phenomenon called authority. Gender ideologies are defined as the belief systems that explain how and why males and females differ. It is the gender ideology, the basis on which every society explains different rights, responsibilities, restrictions and rewards given to each gender. The same way it also justify negative reaction to those who violates gender norms. Gender ideologies also create the gender norms in the society which refers to the behaviours that is expected of people on the basis of status to which they assigned, given their sexual biology. Moreover, in a society, when gender differences are perceived as the real differences, such belief system constitutes 'gender stereotype' when they are shared by collectives. Rejecting the feminists' arguments regarding the causes of women's universal subordination, Leacock (1978:254) argues that women's subordination to men, the development of family as an autonomous economic unit and monogamous marriage are all related to development of private ownership of the means of production. Rogers (1975) argues that women's status is dependent on whether or not they control (i) access to resources, (ii) the condition of their work, and (iii) the distribution of the products of their labour. Engeles (1972) has the opinion that male-imposed restriction on women's sexuality had led women to lower rank in the gender hierarchy. scholars like Sokoloff (1980) say that control over labour, whether productive or non-productive, is the root cause of gender hierarchy where females have the debasement. In a male dominated way of labour sphere, women perform a disproportionate share of unpaid labour in the home and are remitted to a secondary position in the labour market. Homework exacts a good deal of effort and time for women. Though men receive a market value of housework from their wives, which is greater than their own, women have a partial claim on men's income. On the other hand, in the redistribution and allocation of resources, Oren (1973) pointed out that men, besides being benefited from women's domestic labour, could also claim a greater share of resources, irrespective of who brings them into the household.

### *C. Aspects of changing gender domain among the tribal people of Assam*

It has been shown in the foregoing paragraphs that the notion of gender difference in the form of ideology, concept, stereotype etc are the product of social, economic and cultural values put on the work role and behaviour of a particular gender. The tribal gender system can be viewed in those aspects. Gender ideologies change over time depending upon the social, cultural, economic and physical

environment where the people interact. The tribal societies have undergone several changes, internally and externally, in due course of time. Changes of social and physical environment have been very rapid in tribal domain especially in the last four decades. Exposure to non-traditional

<sup>1</sup> Assam is one of the seven states situated in the North-east corner of India. A host of tribal people live in the plains of Brahmaputra valley (the mighty river flowing east to west of the state) in the state.

and non-tribal domain, decreasing access to earning resources, primarily natural, increased necessities of non-traditional types, influx of monetary economy and mismatch between production and necessary cash earning etc have deeply influenced the tribal societies and these introduced a lot of changes and shift of gender position, gender ideology directly related to work role in the society. The change process has not stopped there. It is a continuous process and engenderment has been formulating within these societies in a continuous manner. The ethnic and political economic history of the region shows that there are vast differences in socio-economic system during pre-independent and post-independent era. As has been mentioned in several literatures, there was a lot of socio-cultural re-adjustment during the colonial period among the tribal people. The process of loss of several tribal traits and uniqueness and acceptance of some universal or dominant socio-cultural life-ways was characteristic of that period. But we hardly see any major change in economic pursuits of the tribal people in these days. Nevertheless, an incipient trend of extra-domestic work role like services in some establishments was appeared among them. Joining armed forces, doing some lower grade jobs in tea gardens etc were evident in those days. But a sudden change was quite evident by the early part of 1970s in terms of extra-domestic work-role especially in service sector during the period when lots of welfare measures were taken up by the independent government. These include building of road communication, establishment of government offices that opened up job opportunity and opening of market for easy disposal of agro-products following the increase of urban localities. The latest scenario has been evident in terms of better communication system, establishment of schools and colleges in government and private sectors, availability of goods and services in an improved manner and consequent devaluation of agro-products in terms of cash income and comparative mismatch between the cost of necessary items and price of agro-products in general. Besides, a new type of cultural admixture has been rampant that delimits the traditional domain. Thus for analytical purpose we can construct three stages of socio-cultural and political-economic situation in the region along time period. These are not airtight compartments and there may be some overlapping, but in totality, we can see the trends with a clear notion of

<sup>2</sup>The state was under British rule between 1826 and 1947. By post – independent one mean independence from British Colonial rule on 15th August, 1947.

gender ideologies and change in it. These stages are (i) Stage one (till early 70s), (ii) Stage two (between early 70 and late 1990s), and (iii) Stage three (from late 1990s till date).

#### D. The Sonowal Kacharis: the tribe under study

Kachari is a generic name for a group of tribal people within the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the groups of the Kacharis. The popular opinion about the origin of the term 'sonowal' is that these people used to collect gold by washing the sand in the river Subansiri in upper Assam. The Assamese equivalent of gold is 'soon' and therefore, the people who were involved in this profession were known as the Sonowal. Contrary to the above explanation, oral tradition has it that the Baduhunoloy group of Kachari people established their territory named Hemali and Halali which were situated in and around present day Sadiya of upper Assam. These people came to be known as sonowal from the word 'Hunoloy'. At present the Sonowal Kacharis inhabit the district of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar and Jorhat. They are patrilineal group having clan sub-clan exogamy. They worship their traditional god 'Bathow' and many other traditional deities. They also follow some Vaishnavite rituals as they have become Hinduised accepting the navaishnavism which was first propagated by Sri-Sankardeva in Assam.

## II. GENDER THROUGH AGES

### A. Society and Gender system in Stage One

#### i. Economic activities

It was learnt that food collection, horticulture and herding were three major economic pursuits of the Sonowal Kacharis in the past years. In each of these spheres the involvement of different genders in different capacity or work roles was prevalent among the people-- in some cases overlapping each other and in others segregating among genders. Food collection most probably absorbed a significant part of women's work. People were found collecting food items like dhekia (fern), tubers, tero, cane shoots, tejmuri (a kind of thorny creepers), outenga (a sour fruit) etc. There were instances of collecting such items of vegetables in a group manner where girls, under the guidance of one or more married females went to forest to collect food items, especially on the occasion of community feast or in extensive family level ceremonies. Oral traditions of the people indicated how a boy insists his lover to come to him by bluffing her parents that she would go to pick-up kochu hak (tero shoots) and such other eatables in the field. Perennial horticultural gardens happened to be remained the oldest tradition of the Sonowal Kacharis. These included betel nuts, betel-vine, banana

<sup>3</sup> Vaishnava religion was propagated by Sri Sankardeva in Assam during 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. The tribal people of plains of Assam adapted Vaishnavism to some extent without fully leaving their traditional practices.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to people who adapts Hindu religion.

trees, orange and lemon etc. Other fruits they used were mainly grown wild and people used to collect them from forest. Gardening of perineal crops, most probably, ever remained as male's job, whereas, there were ample evidences that a few works in raising vegetables were done by the females using digging sticks---hulang. There was evidence that people practiced herding to a great extent till recent past. Each of such herding group was called khuti. Cows and buffaloes were reared in those khutis and were kept usually near river banks or in the river islands called Chapor. For this purpose, people were organised in small groups and attended the khuti alternately at different times. Thus on the plea of male persons staying out women had to carry out the duty of the domestic chores very often.

It could be understood that a division of labour though not airtight in nature was prevalent among them. Caring domestic cattle like goat, pigs, cows etc were to some extent a job involved in by the females also. Males were busy with their herds, gardens and other non-domestic works. Fishing with jhakoi (a triangular shaped bamboo made implement) was prevalent mostly among the females. There are proverbs regarding the physical ability of a girl when she fishes with her jhakoi. One of such proverbs narrates that one should observe his cattle in the evening and tender paddy in the morning and one should observe and assess a girl's quality when she draws her jhakoi to catch fish in water. Fishing in deep water and in distant places usually was done by males using an instrument called Poloh. The nature of involvement of females in village level rituals and ceremonies indicates that they had indispensable role to play in socio-cultural life. In socio-religious sphere, female's role was not totally insignificant. The people still have several traditional deities who are propitiated by the females only. For instance, the deity for wealth is a female one and always worshiped by females only. Nevertheless, male deities overran female deities by number and importance. Females did not form a part of several socio-religious performances at family level as well as at village level. History provides information that the tradition of extensive wet rice cultivation was introduced much later - around 13th century, by the Ahoms in the plains of Assam. Thus it could be taken for granted that a more stable food production system among the Sonowal Kacharis started after the interaction with the Ahoms. Ahom administration also introduced a lot of changes in socio-economic structure of its subjects - the Kacharis, Barahis, and Morans etc. Introduction of well defined monetary economy started towards the closing of the Ahom rule in Assam. But it did not immediately penetrate the Sonowal Kachari life ways in rural areas. People were turned to be settled as wet rice cultivator to great extent. This shift of economic activity (techno-culture) curtailed a significant amount of work from the part of women's role in food procurement. Subsequent induction of incipient monetary economy paved the way for marketing the goods as commodity and males inclined to attach with those works related to resource generation. It was equally true that shift of food procuring - from primary gathering to extensive or settled wet rice cultivation did

not totally disarm women from their work spheres. The factual point was that the surplus number of working males reduced the women's involvement in agricultural activities to some extent and certain tasks that required more physical labour and mobility were vested on males. In the later half of the 19th century, exploitation of natural resources like coal, crude oils and petroleum products, tea and forest resources etc. by the colonial government paved the way for revolutionary inflow of monetary economy to people's life. British ruler introduced global market system transferring a lot of traditional products into commodities for cash income. Commercialization of goods and services had far reaching effect on traditional societies across cultures in the world. So also the Sonowal Kachari Society. This discourse of social phenomenon remains important in tracing out the process of engenderment among the tribal people who were gradually Hinduised for past few centuries. The colonial era was also characterised by the extensive exploitation of forest

<sup>5</sup>A Tai-Shan group of population who entered Assam in the early part of 13<sup>th</sup> century and ruled most parts of the present day plains of Assam for nearly six hundred years adapting a process of assimilation and adjustment which helped emerge a new nationality called Assamese in the state of Assam.

resources, cutting short the advantages of the tribal people who extracted a significant part of their livelihood from forest. Next to this was the imposition of rules and regulations on forest land and announcing forest as reserved forest made the situation further grim. Above all the land alienation system where the de-recognition of right on corporate land was induced, made the people totally disadvantaged and handicap in terms of economic aspects. The curtailment in utilization of forest resources and restriction of access to land resource did not come up with any alternative resource generating opportunity, especially for women. Rather, their works to which once they were attached with were devalued in terms of resource generation.

### *ii. Socio-cultural components*

Historical accounts depicts that just before the advent of the colonial rule the people in Assam underwent turmoil in the socio-political life. The people in upper Assam came under the influence of civil war, a revolt against the Ahom royals. This movement was termed as 'the Moamoria revolt' which started from 1770 AD. A good deal of tribal people in upper Assam became the part of the revolt voluntarily or forcefully. The defeat of the revolted group caused havoc in settlement pattern of the tribal people. Oral tradition of Sonowal Kacharis indicates that they had to flee to different parts of the nearby hills and other inaccessible areas. This turmoil was further aggravated by three time Burmese invasions in Assam between 1817 AD and 1826 AD. Scores of people had to take shelter in different places of the region. After the establishment of the British rule these people resettled in newly clear felled areas. The new settlements were not similar to the earlier settlements because these people had to establish their villages neighbouring other communities like the Ahoms, Kalitas,

Koch and many others. Another characteristic change was the establishment of the tea gardens by the British companies in the lands probably once inhabited by the people before the Burmese invasion. Such inter-communal habitats necessitated adjustment and social identity. The colonial rule was also characterised by large scale influx of non-tribal people from other parts of the Indian sub-continent in search of newly opened up opportunities. Thus, a widespread admixture of social relation was bound to occur. This was the time when Assamese language, culture and Assamese nationality took shape in the state. In this new situation several tribal groups were attracted towards some sort of refined religious identities like Vaishnavism and eventually they had to leave most of their traditional practices and social norms. Social environment during the period was not very conducive, as new settlement required time for social adjustment. Ignorance and mistrust among the communities led to occasional clash and rivalry. Treading of women alone and frequently through other village premises was not a safe idea. Oral traditions have shown that barter and exchange system was very much prevalent among the tribal people. Pre-colonial period was not familiar with monetary economy in this region. Earning cash was a very hard job. According to Paik system of Ahom Rule the people used to get land for cultivation in lieu of their physical labour rendered towards royal families. This was also quite evident when the Ahom king expressed his inability to pay in cash to the British after the area became subject to them through Yandabo treaty in 1826. The initiation of monetary economy was a predominantly post colonial phenomenon in the state. We come across the system of taking wholesale right of crops garden of these people by the Sylhetias, the Bengali speaking people believed to be coming from Sylhet district of present day Bangladesh. These people were expert in climbing betel nut trees and orange trees and plucking fruits swiftly. They used to visit the villages before the garden crops like betel nuts, oranges, betel vines gets matured. They offer a lump-sum amount for the entire crops in the garden, some in cash and some in kinds. Another group of traders used to come to the villages to buy the muga cocoons (*Antherea assamensis*). As contrast to the crop traders, cocoon traders were mostly Assamese people hailing from Suwalkuchi of western Assam. They also purchased cocoon for cash and kind. The items exchanged for muga cocoon were various utensils made of bronze and brass metal and some times dress materials of non-traditional type. Thus, one could see that the tribal people hardly used to go out for a trade or market in those days. Outside market was unknown and inaccessible (non-familiar) to them. Rice was basically meant for familial consumption. In case of surplus gain, the paddy was sold in bulk to Marwari Gollas (Stores) situated at

<sup>6</sup>Marwaris are the business communities hailing from a place called Marwar situated in the state of Rajasthan of India. These people captured the commercial sector of the state and even spread their hands to the remote rural and tribal areas. They were the money lenders for kinds produced by the tribal and rural people.

a distant place from the villages. Usually the traders used to come to villages and take away such goods.

Looking into the involvement of both genders in these activities reveals that females' wholesome involvement was there in case of rice production and rearing of muga and edi cocoons. Nearly a half of the works were done by them. But in case of garden product females' involvement became lesser. Males also used to clear fell new plot of land for garden crops very often when such opportunities were available. In this process he had to be out of home for several days in a stretch and maintaining household chores was absolutely a females' job to take care of.

These delineations clearly show that females' participation in livelihood issues were very much present there and it was not replaceable by any means. Whatever earned in cash or kind was basically in front of the family members and at home only. Thus the females had a say on the pricing of the goods and services to some extent.

Case studies conducted among the older people revealed the better position of females in society. The quality of a male person was judged on his capability to produce enough rice and store it in granary and his ability to generate garden crops etc. It is needless to say that those procurements were directly based on availability of land resources which was mostly available in those days. Involvement of females in raising kitchen garden was quite common. Generating cash or kind was mostly seasonal. Thus, daily or monthly income concept was very much lacking among these people. Females' co-operation was a must in almost every sphere, directly or indirectly. This shows that translation of goods and services into cash or kind income was not rapid and males' involvement in this particular step was not so significant. Oral traditions of the Sonowal Kachari Society indicate how important the activities of both the genders were in social life of the people. A girl's ability to perform all the household works, shared cultivation works and food procurement etc were given importance during selecting a mate. Likewise, girls were charmed by a boy who was a healthy, laborious, brave and above all mild and having good temperament. All these ideas were expressed in Bihu songs and juria songs by the people, which were believed to be their earliest known oral tradition. A folk song sung by a boy says to his beloved 'you will transplant the seedling in the tender mud which I will prepare by tilling; you weave gamucha depicting big flowers in the loom that I will make'. The division and sharing of labour, mutual understanding, human quality and humour etc were described in those melodious songs of the people. Individualistic ideology and relative freedom in determining own life ways was more prominent among the people in past years as compared to other non-tribal people surrounding them. In course of selecting life-partner the boys and the girls were very much independent, had free mixing opportunity and the opportunity to understand each other in an effective way. The ability to work hard in the field and to run the household etc. were the criteria of being a successful in-law and in almost all cases girls contained all these characteristics.

### B. Society and Gender system in Stage Two

#### i. Transformation of traditional economy to monetary economy

By early 70s the monetary economy had well penetrated the Sonowal Kachari societies in Assam. A very significant change was the scarcity of agricultural land in this period of time. The tribal people were practicing the clear fell of new land areas very frequently and used to establish new pahams to grow crops. But due to the restriction imposed by the government to acquire forest and wet land, the people had to confine to their original villages only. This has invited the problem of population pressure on the limited land and resources. In most of the cases the families became unable to dispose rice grain for cash or kind as they used to do earlier. This necessitated outward movement of people, especially the males, for cash income. But tribal people were categorically reluctant to enter into business and any other entrepreneurial activities. Investment of any form for profit making was the rarest phenomenon for them. Thus, the only front opened for them was getting a job of some kind. Usually, tribal villages were situated at far away and relatively inaccessible places from urban centers. Thus, it was only the male members

<sup>7</sup>Primary spring and harvesting festival celebrated by tribal as well as non-tribal Assamese communities across the state during the month of April. Folk songs are sung during this festival which carry the meaning of youthfulness and vigor.

<sup>8</sup>Songs sung during Bihu and other occasions describing different aspects of life, condition for agrarrying for love and life etc.

<sup>9</sup>New and temporary (likely to be permanent) settlement established to cultivate in newly clear-felled plots of land by a group of people of a village or people from several villages.

who dare to come out to interact with non-tribal and urban domains. Projecting male children as prospective cash earner was a basic feature for these people.

The famous Assam movement on foreigners' issue had an impact on the villages of remote areas. The Sylhetias and other non-Assamese traders stopped coming to villages as a result of prohibition imposed by the agitators like All Assam Student Union (AASU). Instead of the outside traders, the village youth themselves started marketing their agro-products and poultries etc. This has again curtailed a female's access to cash income directly as the market places were usually situated at a far away places and females were mostly prohibited to go there to sell their belongings.

In agricultural front, the harder physical tasks were usually carried out by males. These include tilling of land with bullocks and plough, hoeing and harrowing, fencing, carrying seedlings to the field, and bringing back home paddy bundles etc. On the contrary, women carried out the works that were more time consuming and continuous like uprooting seedlings, transplantation, harvesting of paddy, thrashing paddy, winnowing and de-husking of paddy etc. Fetching firewood, fishing etc were also male work. Males' jobs were seen as the most important and hardest, while females' works were seen in a lighter way. Males always dispose the end products usually processed by females.

Transformation of goods and services into cash, the most important job, was done by males and hence men's involvement was unavoidable and there was no alternative to it. Thus, females' role in entire process was seen as subordinate to males' work and as a lighter one.

As a welfare measure, the tribal villages were provided with roads and connected to urban localities as well as with market places by government agencies. But this measure was hardly associated with transport services like bus and goods carriers etc. The male members were surely advantaged lot as they could use bicycles to transport their saleable goods to market in an easy way. Otherwise also male person used to carry their product on their shoulders for miles. This was also contrary to the scope of the female's involvement in marketing of their goods and services. There appeared the process of

<sup>10</sup> AASU launched a state wide agitation from the year 1989 onwards demanding identification and deportation of foreigners entered Assam over a period of time. The agitation made a categorical change in the socio-political underpinnings of the state. The agitation continued for long six years.

gender sub-ordination in the society following such situation. Some of the aspects of such happenings have been depicted in the following paragraphs.

### *ii. Gender System in some Social Spheres*

Gender ideologies prevalent in a society influence either gender in different ways. Some spheres of day-to-day life like health, education and economic activities can be assessed in a gendered world for gender specific behaviour and action. Following are some of such queries in the respective fields. These data were generated during the field work to fulfill the requirement of Ph.D. Degree around 1991 to 1994. Besides, the author had the opportunity to observe the changes taking place over a period of time in terms of gender relations in their society. The data depicts the gender specific role of people during the middle stage as defined for the purpose of the paper.

### *iii. Gender and Household Health*

Health care practices among people of tribal society depend on traditional system of health seeking behaviour as well as access to education, health care facilities and financial situation. Gender ideologies many a time determine the balance of health care towards a particular gender.

The study conducted among the Sonowal Kacharis indicates that there is a trend among the literate people to accept modern health-care practices. It was seen that women's education had some positive influences on the health care practices. It was seen that higher the women's educational level, the greater the possibility that they would attend the health care centers during their own disability. An educated woman had the idea and also the courage to go to the health clinic without the help of a male (e.g., husband) guide. This empowered women to take her own decision concerning date, time and ways and means of her attending a medical check-up centre or for treatment. On the contrary,

an illiterate woman possessed a vague mind, fearful to take an otherwise clear decision, expressing apprehension everywhere. Education thus helped summon up courage and provides incentives. It had been revealed that a low educated or nearly illiterate husband was apt to follow the suggestions given and interests evinced by the relatively high educated wife. On the other hand, husband's education was not strongly related to woman's (wife's) good health-care practices. Very few women's husbands accompanied their wives to the health-care centre during their difficulties. It was revealed that the people had certain notions regarding husband-wife relationships. The males used to think that they should not attach themselves to or get concerned too much, about their wives which might lead them to become henpecked, a status that was very much derogatory. Rather, the husband would like to seek help from other women of the village to accompany the wife to the health-care centers.

The study revealed the fact that there prevailed several traditional views on health of different genders. The prevailing notion was that none should be easily concerned with common ailments especially both young males and females. The general conception was that the more one was concerned with illness the greater was the sufferance. A woman was an ideal one provided she could give birth to a good many children without any sign of physical disability. Most husbands would like to have delivery at home only. Women themselves also did not like to go for periodic medical check-up unless the trouble was acute. Compared to overall nursing of women at home or elsewhere, a male would receive utmost care and nursing from his wife and other womenfolk of the household.

It was interesting to note that most females belittled their own health compared to their husbands. The female folk of a household felt duty-bound to ensure safety and welfare of the other family members, especially the males. It was worth noting that males' demands were sought to be fulfilled even at the cost of the female's own health. Most males' demands were rooted in the gender division of labour and work-role perception of the people. It was well-known that the young girls' disabilities were closely guarded; all their maladies were treated secretly. At times it was difficult to maintain secrecy and for fear of exposure most feminine disabilities went without treatment. These were also not discussed with not close relatives, lest they should get widely known. In case of married women such disabilities were, however, discussed with the husband especially when treatment was to be done by some unknown persons. In case of the female maladies the women folk did not take the males into confidence thinking that they knew little about such ailments. People in general did not entertain any idea of limiting family size. Again the people in general liked to have four to five children. If the number exceeded, it went to the credit of the woman concerned. The tendency to have a male child was much strong for both the parents irrespective of their level of education and economic status.

It was found that parents were more concerned over a son's health than a daughter. It was more so if the child was the only son of the parents. Every woman used to think that

husband's (or males') health was more important than women's. The reason of this thinking did lie in the fact that a woman could not generate required livelihood without the assistance of males. She could not till land and so could produce nothing consumable or salable for cash income. A son was the asset of the family and the future old age support of the parents. Daughters were never seen as the family member after marriage. Due to these reasons a male was given more importance, especially by the women as a whole, and so also males' health care was given top priority. Males themselves never used to think that their own health was more important than the females'. But they used to get the maximum nursing from females on demand or without demand. The reason why a female used to feel duty bound to other family members did lie in multiple socio-cultural facts. Above all, these were rooted in gender division of labour and power of control over the means of production and reproduction. There was a significant relationship between high family responsibility and high work involvement during the period when a woman needed rest and care, for instance, in illness and pregnancy, in seasonal indispositions etc. As the people were cultivators, they had a lot of work loads irrespective of gender which could not be minimized with the help of higher level of education or awareness. In a gender-segregated work sphere, the women had to do their part as far as possible ignoring their own health.

It was found that among the low-income group, the women i.e., the mothers hardly had the intention to treat their own health problems. Rather, they preferred, with their limited capacity, to treat the male counterparts and the children. It was also found that high income and high education together helped females go for better health care. When the spirit of better health care prevailed among the people, high economic condition worked as a positive catalyst and low economic condition negated it.

#### *iv. Gender and Education*

Availing education requires distribution of money, readjustment in work spheres and lot of motivation from the part of the students as well as providers of such opportunity, the parental groups. Gender ideology present in the society is likely to determine the extent of education to be received and the way and nature of its accumulation etc.

Parents were, excepting in few cases, less interested in daughter's high education. This notion was well expressed in the opinions of the aged parents. The parents who were educating their daughters thought that passing out High School was the sufficient level of education a girl should have. Parents' opinion showed that they never expected that their daughters would be able to earn money by joining some white-collar jobs as an output of the school education. Educating a daughter had more than one goal: these were to have a good groom and to make them capable of teaching their own offspring. Along with this trend they caught hold the view that every girl should be adept in traditional folkways of life -- the arts and crafts etc. And for this reason, right from the very childhood they were engaged in

multifarious household works irrespective of their educational achievement.

There was also evidence of illiterate but conscious mothers who were taking utmost care and all the pain to educate their children. When we gauge the tendency of the parents to make their children free from work-spheres we find a negative notion on the part of the parents. They most often prefer their children working in the field during planting and harvesting season to schooling. The involvement of girls in the work sphere is always more than the boys. Parent's interests in girl's education can be seen to be negative when the infra-structural facilities provided to them are assessed. The time spent by a girl in the farm or domestic work is always greater than time spent by the boys. Another aspect of the educational life of the children is the parents' least control over the boys compared to that over girls. The gender-stereotyped notion plays a vital role in girls' work load during study periods, irrespective of the education level of the parents.

It was also revealed that when parents had limited resources to provide and there was demand from both genders the males were the advantaged one. There was also difference in the content of the education between these two genders. It was seen that the males had the option to go for science stream whereas females had no choice but for going to Arts regardless of their level of achievements.

In dire economic condition and prevailing socio-physically incompatible conditions, the girls were the worst sufferers. That was because; the girls could not have tuition owing to the non-availability of teachers nearby, whereas the boys could go far away places for it. Moreover, the girls were obliged to do certain works in the morning and in the evening hours essentially for which they were bound to remain indoors most of the time. The gender-stereotyped notion debarred them from riding a bicycle also. Moreover, they were not expected to travel long distance alone as there was fear of sexual abuse.

In the introductory part it has been well depicted that the notion of gender and economic activities are very closely related. Access and rights to different resources are mostly determined by the existing gender role expectations in a society. The division of labour, distribution of resources and control over resources are always attached to either gender in a gender differentiated way. In this light a study was conducted to see how the society was gender differentiated in the work role expectation and economic front.

#### *v. Gender System in Economic Activity and Property Right*

The Sonowal Kachari people strictly differentiate themselves on the basis of gender identity. In Sonowal Kachari society if a male person's behavior and work role resembles that of a female he is termed as maikimua, a term highly derogatory for males. The children are socialized right from their early childhood to internalize a particular gender identity. Male children are inspired to follow the male roles whereas the females are drawn towards the mother. In their games and recreations, and sports also a

distinct gender differential behaviour is seen prevail among the children. It is also seen that the people do not have any gender specific term for male and female children. The people are also found having the notion that the old persons are equal to the children. It is a common practice among the people to make a joke implicating the grand children as husband or wife of the grand father or grand mother. Thus it is seen that the people recognize gender in terms of the act of reproduction. The children are seen as immature enough to procreate and thus there is no gender differential term among the pre-pubescent children irrespective of sex. Rather, the people use the same term to refer to a boy or a girl. Persons whose children have children are not expected to reproduce and thus termination of reproductive trend equates them with the children of pre-pubescent age. It was tried to examine relationship between gender division of labour and males' control over the means of production and reproduction. It was found that males always controlled the end products of the major income generating resources. In most of the income

*Maiki is equivalent word for female and mua means similar. Thus the term refers to a male who resembles a female by nature.*

generating processes the females, too, did a lot of works, at times more than males. Their participation was essential in most of the income generating works. But they lacked the opportunity to have income from it. They controlled little amount of resources, and in most cases the married women did not have absolute right over their own money. Dominating the market economy, the males held the power and authority for reallocation, distribution and redistribution of output of the products. It was also worth noting that when the surrounding extra domestic world had made a shift from traditional life ways to market economy to certain extent the very core of the Sonowal Kacharis did not change and thus the women did not find suitable environment to enter in to new resource generating work spheres. The traditional life way of the women did not permit them to involve themselves in market economy, and they had to depend on males for final outputs. Males could generate money which was the most important need for livelihood. Women were confined mostly to domestic and non-productive works. Thus, males could assign value to their own works. This idea was very important in understanding or constructing gender specific model in that females' non-productive (in terms of cash income) works were given less value or no value as compared to males works and, as such works were attached to females only, they were looked down upon by males as less important entity in the sphere of income generation. This structural framework of domestic /public distinction of work sphere (which was directly related to income generating activities) provided males with power girl is not permitted for active participation. These and such other evidences make the hypothesis valid and it can be concluded that among these people the females are not enjoying a favourable socio-cultural life.

To make work role performance of both males and females understandable, the Chat - I has been developed. It shows

and authority over the females who engaged in less valued works. This held good for conceptual framework to understand the root cause and process of engenderment among the people when one thought of the social situation that became current right from the exposure of the people to the colonial rule. Equation on the value placed on the works done by males and females are not explicitly expressed in people's behavior. Rather, it was inherent in their perception. But women's submission to males by doing .disproportionate (measured by quantity and time spent) works in farm and at home showed that women's work roles were perceived as unequal and contained lesser value to men's work. It was seen that the females always would do a disproportionate work among these people. It was not very clear whether a woman used to do all these without any grumble due to the fact that she thought herself to be duty-bound to the husband or the other family members, or whether it was just the result of the socialization process through which she categorized the work roles as hers. The females supported both the views to some extent. They said that they did all these as they were female and these were their works only. On the other hand, they said that men did a lot of hard works which a female could not do and nor was a female expected to. Males needed rest and comfort which could be provided by the females only. Most often it was reported that the males as husbands spoke roughly regarding their so-called non-expertise to run the familial works smoothly to the full satisfaction of the males. There was evidence that a male, usually the husband, demanded services from the wife after his day's hard work ignoring the fact that the woman also worked the whole day in the interest of the family. Contrarily, a wife was never expected to lay such a demand to her husband at any rate and if even rarely it happened the husband is simply regarded as a henpecked one. There exist among these people some socio-religious restrictions to segregate women from the right on parental property. People follow some religious norms regarding the girls' participation in some spheres. By this way, really or symbolically the people restrict the unmarried girls from entering into certain economic activities. That pubescent unmarried girls are not permitted to enter the family granary, or to touch the store etc. are significant enough to refrain them from availing themselves of power to inherit or make decision on parental property. But symbolically the girls are thought of as the sign of wealth for the family. On the other hand, a girl is never allowed to worship ancestors even in the absence of a male child in a family on the ground that by doing so she would be entitled to inherit parental property which is against a normal family code. That a married girl is detached from the parental family is seen in the observances of certain rituals where the married the primary work spheres prevalent among the Sonowal Kacharis and role played by each gender in it. The Chart also reveals the nature of output and its utilization aspects. The Chart clearly shows that in most of the work spheres, whether it is income generating or otherwise, the involvement of females is always there in different extent.

**Chart- I**  
**Nature Of Work Role Performance By Different Genders**

WORK SPHERES	NATURE OF INVOLVEMENT	WORK DONE BY	UTILITY OF PRODUCT
RICE CULTIVATION	i) Tilling land	males only	i) food item for family consumption ii) rice as commodity for sale
	ii) uprooting seedling	females only	
	iii) carrying seedling	males only	
	iv) transplanting	females only	
	v) weeding	females only	
	vi) reaping	females only	
	vii) carrying paddy	males only	
	viii) Thrashing	females only	
	ix) winnowing and de-husking	females only	
GARDENING	i) tilling and hoeing	males only	i) family consumption ii) cash crop
	ii) putting fertiliser	Males and occasionally females	
	iii) planting	males only	
	iv) watering	males and occasionally females	
	v) fencing	males only	
COCOON REARING ( <i>Muga</i> )	i) purchasing seeds	males only	i) Cocoon usually for sale
	ii) tying moth	males/females	
	iii) protecting from ants and birds	males/ females	
	iv) collecting matured larva	males/females	
	v) detaching matured cocoon	males/females	
COCOON REARING ( <i>Edi</i> )	i) select seed	females only	i) warm clothes for familial use
	ii) tying moths and caring eggs	females only	
	iii) collecting leaves	males/females	
	iv) providing leaves	females only	
	v) collecting matured larva	females only	
	vi) processing cocoon	females only	

Contd...

WORK SPHERES	NATURE OF INVOLVEMENT	WORK DONE BY	UTILITY OF PRODUCT
REARING FOWLS/ DUCKS/PIGS	i) providing shelter	females only	i) consume at home ii) use in rituals iii) commodity for sale
	ii) caring and protection	females only	
	iii) feeding	females only	
WEAVING	i) all	females only	i) for family and individual use only ii) Meeting familial needs
CLEANLINESS	i) cleaning cow shed	females only	
	ii) cleaning and sweeping houses	females only	
	iii) washing clothes	females only	
	iv) washing utensils	females only	
PREPARATION	i) cooking food	females only	Meeting familial demand Meets social demand Liquor for usual consumption As commodity for sale
	ii) tea and breakfast	females only	
	iii) entertaining guest	females only	
	iv) preparing ceremonial items	females only	
	v) preparing liquor	females only	
CATTLE KEEPING	i) feeding and caring	males only	i) for agricultural use
FISHING	i) nearby place	males/females	
	ii) distant and deep	males only	i) consume at home
FOOD COLLECTION	herb collection	females usually	Consumption at home
	others	males	

On the basis of Chart I, the next Chart has been prepared. Here the activities that could generate income (cash mostly) has been taken into account. The Chart also tries to show what part of the work in each case was done by either gender. It becomes evident from this chart that women do a

major part of all the income generating works. But they hardly get benefited from sharing activities. Marketing of finished goods are always done by the males in almost all the cases and the earning is controlled by males.

Chart – II  
Share of Work roles, Marketing and Control of Income

Commodity for sale	Gender involved in selling	Nature of involvement	Pattern of output	Number of works done by males/females	Control output by	Utilised output for
Rice	Any male person	Takes to market	Cash	3/6	Male (head)	Family expenditure
Garden crops	Male who works	Takes to market	Cash	5/2 (shared)	Owner male	Family expenditure (if father) else personal
Liquor	Female	Sell at home	Cash	0/all	Female involved	Family expenditure (if mother) else personal
Poultry	Any male	Takes to market	Cash	0/all	Owner female	Family expenditure (if mother) else personal
Cattle	Any male	Takes to market	Cash	shared	Male head	Family expenditure
Cocoon	Male	Sell at home	Cash	5/4 (shared)	Male head or person involved	Family expenditure (if father) else personal

### C. Gender System Revisited: Society and Gender system in Stage Three

A more recent observation of the studied people in contemporary days reveal a lot of changes in gender ideology and gender differentiation in their social milieu. A brief study among the people reveals that there appeared some categorical changes in infra-structure facilities, social environment and resource generation facilities. These changes have led to the change of notion about gender relation in their society.

The first and the foremost is the changing nature of job market and economic activities. Production of rice has been severely affected by an artificial canal dug through the paddy field to flush out the water from the nearby township. This resulted in the overflowing of water and flooding the paddy fields very often for which production of rice decreased a lot. Rice cultivation no longer remained a primary source of subsistence. Secondly, increased price of essential articles of day to day life could hardly be equaled with the relatively lesser price of rice and other garden products. The old orange and betel nut gardens no longer remained viable source of cash income for the people. Thus the devaluation of agro-products was rampant in the area.

Next, government agencies no longer remained the frequent job provider for the aspirants and educated males. Government policies for not recruiting people in vacant posts severely affected the job seekers. Thus education with special attention to male children became a non-productive one. Given the better communication facilities the girls emerged as better students in terms of passing out the High School examination. They could further go to the colleges

without staying in hostels or so. Welfare and development schemes have been initiated by government agencies where the educated girls could take a share. Grants and loans for entrepreneurship development attracted the educated females to a great extent. Several private ventures have been coming up in the region where both males and the females are finding a place for job involvement. Buying things, visiting government offices for different purposes, visiting health centers etc by no means remained a male's job. Females have come up as better option for such activities. Such outward movement also created a sense of gender equality to a great extent and it is evident that there emerged a change in gender ideology and work role perception among the people.

As has been stated elsewhere in this writing, the young generation has taken the lead in almost every sphere of socio-political domain; there appeared a congenial social environment among the villagers and neighbouring communities. This has happened especially after the famous Assam agitation on foreigners issue between the years 1980-85. There exists no more fear of physical and sexual abuse for the girls for treading through these villages. Increased and liberal interaction has been very much evident among the young generation and a sense of oneness has been in construction in the area. This has given the women a more mobility cutting short several gender specific inhibitions and restrictions existed earlier. Another new trend that helped cut short gender sub-ordination in terms of involvement in cultivation activities is the use of machinery in tilling land. This has cut short the dominance of males in tilling land to transplant. Now, by paying money even a woman head of a family can get land prepared for transplanting without male

person's help. Due to better transport and communication facilities several local males entered into the business of selling poultry and garden products available in the villages. They frequently visit the households in search of saleable products and buy them cash in hand basis and sell them in urban localities for profit. This has also curtailed the role of male person in the household as the sole disposer of finished goods for cash. Now females can dispose these items from home for cash without disturbing the assigned role of household chores. Now, parents have dared to say that a girl child is not less worth than a male child. This way there flourished a new trend regarding education of children. A male child, if he does well in school, is encouraged to go ahead. But in case of his difficulty in passing out examinations, parents do not pressurise him. Instead, he would look for some income generating option at the cost of his further studies. Now, getting a job after school is a remote possibility. So people have least interest for higher education for boys. In case of girls, parents feel that they should be educated as much as they can to get a white collar job if possible. Girls are hardly encouraged to involve in trade or business at the cost of their study.

### III. CONCLUSION

Working of gender system is very much related to the work role available in a society. When the tribal society was in a balanced way and also must be translated to the people concerned in a meaningful way. opened to the non-traditional world we see a lot of rearrangements in gender system. Development of certain kind and the open-up of market are very much related to the process of globalization in a broader perspective. Such aspects have been translated to the tribal domain as devaluation of their traditional means of subsistence as well as scarcity of livelihood resources. Traditional inhibition in entering in to the entrepreneurship monetary economy, development of urban localities and contractual relation of these people with the non-tribal domain has increased the requirement of people day by day. Cash income became the primary determinant of the economic health of a household. Extra domestic chores were opened up for the males following the uncongenial social and physical environment for females. Females confined at domestic chores and their works were marked as non-productive. Thus, along with the devaluation of females work the gender identity related to them also devalued and gender sub-ordination surfaced in the society. This is quite a common character in the 'Stage two'. The Chart shows that during the 'Stage two' women used to do a lot of work ignoring their own health status and try to fulfill the demands of the other family members. This happened because the women in the society perceived some expected gender ideological work roles as their own and thus felt duty-bound to satisfy other's demands. Due to this notion the women had to do most of the household works and had to be confined at home only. As this aspect of home bound ness became an established notion, people perceived the idea that they need not have higher education as education was not necessary to do household works. For this reason the girls

development and searching for innovative ventures for livelihood remains a tribal bias. This sort of incompatibility leads to social maladjustment within the society. Development also denotes the improvement of infrastructure as well as social environment. And we see when such developments are transferred to the people in a meaningful way society changes towards a desired better way. In this delineation we can notice how a traditional society maintains a relatively healthy gender system when there was no external agent of change penetrates the society. In the same way we see how the entry of new aspects (monetary economy etc) can disturb the very core of gender system creating hierarchy and related negative aspects in a society. But, social aspects are not stable. They change over time. In this case also we see a trend of change in gender system with the changing aspects of surrounding environment. Thus, one can safely argue that development must be there. On the basis of the findings the working and maintenance of gender system in the Sonowal Kachari Society through ages is presented in Chart III. It shows that the Sonowal Kachari society has been a gender biased one. So far as the studied spheres are concerned, it is seen that all the three spheres are interrelated. But we see different dimension of gender specific behaviours in different time period. These differences are surely the product of changes introduced in their social, cultural, physical and economic environment. The chart shows that in olden days the notion of gender was not influenced by the notion of job hierarchy in terms of cash income or priority basis. Gender division of labour was very much there, but the hierarchy or specific value put on the particular work was not very prominent. This was due to the fact that the notion and requirement of cash income was not very prominent in those days. They could fulfill a lot of their requirement for cash income at home by disposing their garden products as well as cocoons etc. Influx of were debarred from being in the sphere of higher education. Again, females placed higher value to males' health and they used to think the sons' very physical presence in the family and their health and comfort as more important than their own and daughters' health. Thus they used to do a lot, provided services and went on giving birth to children in the expectation of a male child. This trend was in existent because, the work spheres were segregated in such a way that to generate livelihood, males' constant presence was unavoidable in the family. Sons were thought of as the asset to the family and the clan and they were also thought of as the old age support. Females were never seen as earners. Thus males were given priorities for higher education to go for white-collar jobs. It was seen that husbands ignore wife's health status and pain of work involvement and demanded pleasure and enjoyment for their own self-asserted hard works. This trend prevailed because women hardly earned livelihood and their works were devalued to a certain extent. So, as they were attached to insignificant works, males perceived them as inferior and enjoyed the opportunity to show that their works were more value oriented and for this, females had to satisfy males providing them with service and pleasure and also doing disproportionate labors. In the

same way the females were thought of as unfit for any white-collar jobs or extra-domestic work and males had the opportunity to exercise control over them. And by earning cash income the males could command control over female's labour and services. It was also seen that women hardly got the decision making power in the spheres of spending money in health care activities that could harm their health a lot. This trend was in existence on the logic that women were never thought of as being earners or custodians of family assets. The girls were debarred from inheriting the parental property by means of some cultural codes. In no point of time thus a woman received a substantial amount of money for her own interests. Males' dominant behaviours were legitimized in the Sonowal Kachari society through the process of engenderment. It is the way of enculturing the people and through which the females accepted the

submissiveness to the males. The overall result was that the males had the tendency to dominate over the females and in this way the gender system stability was maintained among the Sonowal Kacharis.

The Chart also shows a categorical difference in the gender relation in the present day situation (Stage three). As the chart shows, females are now involved in extra domestic chores, they are more aware of their health and self beings, they have been equal in many spheres of life -- educational achievements, competing for jobs, going for extra-domestic activities and many more. The changed social, physical and economic environment has influenced the gender relationship to a great extent and we see a trend towards a gender equal society among these people in many spheres of life.

**CHART – III**  
**Continuity and Change in Gender System**

Levels of Investigation	Stages of observation	Areas of Investigation in Gendered World		
		<b>Household Health</b>	<b>Economic Activities</b>	<b>Education</b>
Observation Level	Stage One	Females seek rest during illness/ pregnancy	Fixed gender division of labour to serve the entire family by both genders.	Need of education for female not felt. Working outside traditional domain not attractive.
	Stage Two	Women duty bound to work during Illness and Pregnancy	Work as duty for women and serve to males by doing domestic and non-productive works disproportionately	Females likely to be less Educated as ones being confined at home
	Stage Three	Females demand rest during illness/pregnancy	Involved in extra domestic and productive work role. Work as means of livelihood	Females invariably sent to schools. Do better in school examination.
	Stage One	Both gender's wellness important if situation permits	Little value on cash earning. Earning at home. Males important for heavy works.	Few males educated to certain levels. Aspiration for job not dominant.
	Stage Two	Males' health more important: special concern to sons: birth of children in expectation of more male child	Earning of livelihood by males: Male child as old age support to the parents	Males as white collar job holder: Higher education for males
	Stage Three	No way males advantageous; mostly equal value to children of both genders.	Both genders can earn livelihood. Females may also be old age support.	Females as preferred white collar job seeker if available. Males take on cash income as and when opportunity comes at the cost of higher education.

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Level of Interpersonal (Gender) Relation and Action	Stage One	Husband/males tries to compensate loss of work by other means	No differential value put on any work.	Least requirement to enter into non-traditional extra domestic work.
	Stage Two	Husband's ignorance to wife's health: demands of pleasure and service from wife	Devaluation of females' work raising males' value in society	Males' opportunity to enter into non-traditional extra-domestic work spheres
	Stage Three	Females take initiative for own betterment/compensate work lost in other means	Involvement of females in male's work sphere making males not unique entity.	Both genders capable to compete for same opportunities at extra-domestic level.
Level of Socio-cultural Action	Stage One	Males provide relief to women by some other means	Both males and females are important in terms of livelihood domain. Lack of concept of property transfer.	Males earn some cash income with mutual agreement/understanding with female counterpart.
	Stage Two	Females' lack of decision making power in the sphere of health	Females as non-earners lack of decision making power: No entitlement to parental property: Segregated by means of socio-religious codes	Males solely attached with Cash income
	Stage Three	Women take decision. Make male person responsible to seek health care for them.	Females as real or prospective earner can influence familial decisions. Entitlement to parental property if no male members exists.	Both genders capable of earning cash with slightly male advantage.
Level of Abstraction	Stage One	Strong gender division of labour exists without hierarchy and value put on work role of either gender. No marked gender sub-ordination noticed.		
	Stage Two	Cognitive categorization of gender identity and inequalities in terms of value put on works done by either gender. Gender specific work role expectation and perception of gender specific behaviour by either gender. Visible practice of gender Sub-ordination		
	Stage Three	Reduced gender division of labour in certain male dominated domains. Values put on work role of either gender heads towards equality. Trend of gender equality in most social spheres visible.		

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