Surviving patriarchy beyond care

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Samhita Barooah 28 August 2026 Updated 28 Aug 1048 views

Sometimes we are unaware of the family champions within our own ancestors. We never realise that behind their unconditional care, compassion and smiles, they might be holding up huge struggles in life. One such memory was of my recently demised aunt, Rekha Jethai.

My father was writing a tribute for his elder cousin, Late Smt. Preetirekha Barooah. He just wrote about her motherhood, sacrifice and life full of struggle. I just wanted to know more about her education and work. A woman's life is summed up mostly through her marriage and motherhood after her death. This is an attempt to know a little more about Rekha Jethai.

She was an aunt to me, Rekha Jethai. Sibsagar holds a strong ancestral root for me. It used to be my paternal hometown. As a child in the early 80s, I was dragged by my father to visit my family home and all relatives in Sibsagar, even if the visit was for a day. This habit of my clan-conscious father made me familiar with my paternal relatives. One such home was in Phukon Nagar, and this was the home of Rekha Jethai. She was my father's first cousin and elder sister. Rekha Jethai’s home was always warm, spotlessly neat and welcoming. It was also a home of very calm and quiet people. I was always celebrated by Rekha Jethai, who wanted to know more about my new endeavours in life, whether it was education or my work. She used to be cool and composed and listened quietly with a pleasant smile on her face. I used to wonder always: despite the smile and tightly made hair bun with mildly oiled hair, her eyes were sad.

As a child, I never knew much about her, but as I grew up, I heard from family elders about her early widowhood and struggles in life. Only after she touched her late eighties could I gather the courage to know more about her single motherhood. Rekha Jethai grew up in Doomdooma and studied in a local primary school in the early 50s. She was the eldest daughter of five children. She completed her IA or Class 12 and got enrolled in a BA course at Joysagar College. After her first year of BA, she was married at the early age of 18 or 20 years in 1960 to Late Prof. Amulyadhar Barooah, who taught at Jorhat Engineering College. He was a professor of Chemistry. They had two sons, Riju Dada and Damon Dada. She had to return to Sibsagar after her husband, Prof. Barooah, had an unnatural death. Some people said it was due to mental health conditions, but mostly the reasons were never revealed. Those days, mental health was a taboo. Nobody knew about his condition, and no facilities were available for adequate treatment without judgement. Today, we have access to mental health professionals, care homes and treatment centres. Those days, nobody even dared to share a word about such issues due to stigma and discrimination.

She had to bear the brunt of being a young widow with two toddler sons of four years and two years. This turning point in her life was a huge transformation. She had to survive the tradition-bound society and patriarchal norms of leading a pious life as a single mother and a widow at the same time. Her struggle for survival had to be sustained through a job at the Government Boys' Technical School, where she was appointed as a cashier. The school authorities promised her a teaching job if she could complete her BA course. Her sons were looked after by her maternal family, and later she joined a night college to complete her BA. During the day, she would work as a cashier, and at night she studied for her graduation. After completing her graduation, she also continued to work as a cashier in the Govt Boys Technical School in Sibsagar till her retirement. She was never given the teacher's job. She managed to sustain her household and educate her sons to be independent and working in prestigious organisations later. Rekha Jethai, or Preetirekha Barooah, left us for her eternal journey on August 18, 2026, at the age of 90 years. Her life, resilience and survival after the sudden setback in life will remain an inspiration for many generations. Women of her kind are priceless and guiding signposts who managed to survive the struggles of life with dignity, resilience and strength. May she find happiness and peace wherever she is.

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