

# **SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN**

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**By**

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## CHAPTER I

### I N T R O D U C T I O N

The medieval period of Assam history is said to have begun from the coming of the Ahoms in the early part of the thirteenth century till the termination of their rule in 1826. Assam, during the Ahom rule, consisted of the following present districts of the Brahmaputra valley, namely, Kamrup, Barpeta, Pragjyotishpur, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat and major portion of Nagaon. When the Ahoms first came to this land, many independent tribes like Chutiyas, the Morans, the Barahis and the Kacharis were ruling in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley<sup>1</sup>. In the western part which retained the old name of the kingdom of Kamrupa, and later came to be known as Kamata, a line of Hindu kings were ruling with their capital at Kamatapur. Further, in both banks of the Brahmaputra, there were a class of landlords called Bhuyans, who exercised independent or autonomous power in their respective areas. Another powerful tribe called Koch established their kingdom in the western Brahmaputra valley, on the ruins of the kingdom of Kamata, in the sixteenth century<sup>2</sup>. But in the long run, the Ahoms

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1. For details on the Chutiyas and the Kacharis, see E.Gait, A History of Assam, Gauhati, 1984, Chapters III & X.

2. For details on the Kingdom of Kamata, the Bhuyans and the Koches, see K.L. Barua, Early History of Kamrupa, Gauhati, 1966, Chapters X, XII & XIII.

became the masters of the valley extending upto the river Manaha, subjugating all these tribes. They had also successfully fought a series of wars against the great Mughals in the seventeenth century and thereby resisted the eastward expansion of the Mughals towards Burma and beyond<sup>3</sup>. But internal disorder and turmoils in the later part of their rule paved the way for the Burmese invasions, which subsequently led to the annexation of Assam to the Indian territories of the English East India Company in 1826 A.D.

The Ahoms, during their somewhat unusually long rule of six hundred years in Assam, not only brought political unity to the valley but also social integration. It was for the Ahoms that this land came to be known as Assam or Asam<sup>4</sup>, its earlier name being Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha. They built a society through a process of assimilation of different tribes and communities, which came to be identified as Assamese. They themselves intermarried with almost all tribes and communities inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley and adjacent hill areas, accepted their culture and generated force which made the society catholic and liberal. No doubt, the Ahoms had their own language (including

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3. S.K. Chatterjee, The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, Gauhati University, 1955, PP.45f.

4. P. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdom, Gauhati University, 1968, P.19.

scripts) and religion, but they did not impose them on the conquered, because these could have created resentment among the latter and obstruct the process of free assimilation. Slowly the Ahoms got themselves Hinduised or Sanskritized, but some of the elements of their culture they retained to the last. As such, during their rule, we find the growth and development of a new culture arising out of the fusion of tribal, Tai Ahom and Hindu elements<sup>5</sup>.

The period of the Ahom-Mughal wars synchronised with rise of the Neo-Vaishnavite or Bhakti movement in Assam propounded by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. This movement revolutionised the outlook of the society of the Brahmaputra valley and provided it with a common cultural pattern. As a result of this movement, "heterogenous faiths and creeds that prevailed in the land gradually disappeared and a common and simple religion based on strict monotheism and on ethico-devotional codes of conduct sprang up"<sup>6</sup>. Common rites and practices, common scriptures, common set of saints and a common deity fostered in them a new sense of cultural unity. It broke many tribal barriers and created the ideological background for a cosmopolitan society. Thus

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5. S.L. Barua, A Comprehensive History of Assam, New Delhi, 1968, PP.408ff.

6. Ibid, P.252.

while the Ahoms fostered the growth of the Assamese society in the political plane creating conditions for assimilation, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement did it in the grass-root level. "The preponderance of tribal elements in this phase of the culture not only distinguished it from the earlier phases, but also gave the culture itself a new energy and a new form. It became distinct from all other Indian culture, even from those with which it was ideologically allied through Neo-Vaishnavism"<sup>7</sup>.

Social and cultural values undergo very slow changes. This is more true in the ancient and medieval times, when mass communication was very limited. As such the pattern of society in medieval Assam with its cherished values had its roots in the past. But sources for the social history of ancient Assam being largely confined to the inscriptions and a few specimens of archaeological remains, our knowledge on the subject is very limited. Yet, what can be safely conjectured is that the ruling classes came under the pale of Hinduism at least by the fourth century of the Christian era and that they took measures for expansion of Hindu or Aryan culture mainly through agrahara settlements or by building temples of Aryans God like Surya and Visnu and Aryanised Gods and Goddesses like Siva and Sakti. The

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7. Ibid, P.253.

number of Brahmins, who were the torch-bearers of Aryan culture were very few and so also the number of those who got Hinduised. While spreading Aryans culture and religion among the non-Aryan tribes, the Brahmins themselves in many cases, accepted non-Aryan rites and customs and worked for preserving these values. As pointed out by D.D. Kosambi, "the Brahmins often preserved tribal or local peasant jati customs and primitive lore in some modified form, as the priest who had taken them over"<sup>8</sup>.

In Assam, which was preponderantly a land of non-Aryan Mongoloid tribes, Aryan culture had to make large-scale compromises for its expansion. Yet the process was so slow that till the spread of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the formal acceptance of Hinduism by the Ahom king in the later part of the seventeenth century, Hinduism had very little impact in the eastern Brahmaputra valley. But once it gained ground, it exerted powerful influence. Consequently although the basic tribal values could not be wiped out, they got modified, giving distinctiveness to the Assamese society. Two such outstanding features of medieval Assamese society are the laxity of caste-system and the comparative high status of women.

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8. D.D. Kosambi, The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline, New Delhi, 1981, P.172.

Hindu society in ancient Assam was built upon the principles of Varnasramadharma. It is recorded in the Nidhanpur grant that Bhaskarverma (c.594-650AD) was born for proper organisation of Varnasrama which had become mixed up<sup>9</sup>. Indrapala (c.1040-1065AD) effected a proper division of the four asramas and the four varnas<sup>10</sup>. But this division was completely abandoned by the tribal kings including the Ahoms who came from societies, where there was complete equality of all tribesmen. In the process of Hinduisation, divinity was attached to the Ahom royal family making their progenitors descendants of the Aryan God, Indra, but in practice they were given the status of Sudra only, and not of Khatriya. Not only the Ahoms, even the high caste Hindus like Kayasthas and the Kalitas were allotted Sudra status. Under the circumstances, society in medieval Assam, on the basis of caste, was broadly divided only into two classes, the Brahmins who formed the minority and the Sudra, who formed the vast minority. Being a minority and having had to live in the midst of non-Aryan people, the Brahmins of Assam had to be very liberal in their social outlook and give up many rites and practices followed by their counterparts in other parts of India. As observed in the

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9. P.C. Chowdhury, History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D., Gauhati, 1966, P.311.

10. M.M. Sarma (ed), Inscriptions of Ancient Assam, Gauhati University, 1978, P.187.

Census Report of 1891: "The Brahmins of Assam proper seem to be ignorant of various caste divisions which are found in Bengal and other parts of India"<sup>11</sup>.

Amidst the tribes, there was free social intermixture including inter-tribal marriage. Under the paik system of the Ahoms, which formed the basis of their administration, all commoners, irrespective of their caste, except the members of the priestly class had to render manual service to the state as a paik. Besides, Momai Tamuli Barbarua, while reorganizing the villages during the days of Swargadeo Jayadhawaj Singha (1648-1663AD) integrated members of different castes and communities in the same village,<sup>12</sup> thereby promoting the growth of cosmopolitan societies. This hindered the generation of social differences which could have grown on the basis of caste. On the other hand, there were very few professional castes in Assam. Certain professions like spinning and weaving was the occupation of women of all castes and classes including the queens and wives of the priests. Fishing was done by all. Ploughing by the plough share was considered a noble profession and even the princes knew how to plough. During the days of the Ahoms, only the Sonowals, most of whom were Kacharis

11. Census Report of Assam, 1891, cited in J. Bargohain, Asamar Sanskritir Itihas, Jorhat, 1989, P.238.

12. S.K. Bhuyan (ed), Deodhai Asam Buranji, Gauhati, 1962, P.130.

emerged as a professional caste. Thus there was no atmosphere for the growth of a rigid caste system in Assam even after large scale Hinduisation of the commonality.

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement also created conditions for the growth and continuance of an egalitarian society. Sankardeva gave initiation to all who were devoted to Hari or God. Among his disciples, there were Govinda, a Garo; Paramananda, a Miri; Narahari, an Ahom; Jayaram a Bhutiya; Chandsai a Muslim; Bhattadev, a Brahmin;<sup>13</sup> Lakha (later rechristened as Narattoma), a Nocte Naga; Sriram Ata, a Hira; Bhabora Das, a Kaivarta; and Madhava of Jayantia village,<sup>14</sup> (possibly a Jayantia). Sankardeva repeatedly asserted that "a Chandala whose body, word and mind are turned upon the remembrance of God is superior to a Brahmana maintaining his twelve virtues"<sup>15</sup>. After his death, the message of Bhakti propagated through his creed called Eka Saraniya Nama Dhama and later Mahapurushiya Dhama, was carried to the eastern Brahmaputra valley by Gopaldeva of Bhavanipur. Among the Vaishnava satras or monasteries of upper Assam, the most prominent were those of Mayamora and Dihing founded by Anirudhadeva and Sanatanadeva

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13. Amulya Ratna (Manuscript dated 1768 Saka) cited in M. Neog Sankardeva and His Times, Gauhati University, 1965, P.369.

14. M. Neog, Op.cit., P.369.

15. Sankardeva, Kirtana-Ghosa, (ed) M. Neog, Gauhati, 1955, VV.129, 380, 441, 1826.

respectively in the first part of the seventeenth century. Having had to receive devotees mainly from different tribes of eastern Assam, these two satras were particularly egalitarian in outlook and organisation, where all devotees were treated equally. Even a Brahmana devotee in these satras could not demand special treatment or favour on the strength of his high caste. This democratic outlook worked for creating social assimilation and unity among different tribes and communities.

After accepting Vaishnavism, the tribesmen gave up many of their unclean habits, discarded animism and became more and more refined in their dealings. Many of them discarded their tribal dialects and accepted Assamese as their lingua franca<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, they also influenced the customs and beliefs of the new sect. The following observation of S.K. Chatterjee with regard to Indo-Mongoloid participation in Hindu culture may be cited here. "It was of a piece with evolution of culture and history in other parts of India, it was largely a case of progressive Indianisation or Hinduisation of the Mongoloid peoples, bringing them

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16. S.N. Sarma, The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam, Gauhati University, 1966, P.159.

within the fold of what may be called 'Sanskrit culture'. It was not a case of one-sided influence or absorption. It was also a case of Mongoloid speeches, ideologies, cults and customs being engrafted on the stock of the Hindu speech and ideology, cult and customs"<sup>17</sup>.

This interaction or assimilation between the Aryans and the non-Aryans was more pronounced in Assam than it had been in many other parts of India. As a result, the Sanskrit based Assamese language of the state got enriched by incorporation of many tribal vocabularies, and many tribal rites and customs with or without modification were carried over to the Assamese Hindu society. It is interesting to note that many items of Assamese aristocracy of medieval times which are in use and considered so till today like Sarai, safura, maihang or bankanhi, embroidered japi, etc. and the musical instruments like bhortal, daba and kali played in the satras were adopted from the tribes. As pointed out by S.N. Sarma, "this give and take policy brought several tribes to the fold of the Assamese nationality and thus helped in building the structure of Assamese society"<sup>18</sup>.

Another distinct feature of medieval Assamese society, which is true of the present as well, is the

17. S.K. Chatterjee, Kirata Jana Kriti, Calcutta, 1951, P.53.

18. S.N. Sarma, Op.cit., P.160.

comparative high status of women. Even though the Assamese Hindu society like its counterparts elsewhere was patriarchal and as such guided in general, by the codes of the Manu samhita, freedom, which women enjoyed in tribal societies could not be wholly taken away from their hands. Women played an indispensable role in demonstrating economy by actively participating in cultivation in every stage except ploughing. Some tribes even after their acceptance of Hinduism and till recent times resorted to zhumming or slash and burn cultivation, which was mainly the work of women. The cultivation of paddy, cultivation of cereals, vegetables, fruits, tobacco, sugar-cane etc. were also done by women. Besides doing all other jobs allotted to women by nature and tradition in all parts of the world like bearing and rearing up of children, attending upon her husband, parents-in-law and other senior members of the family, nursing the sick, cooking, cleaning the house, looking after the domesticated animals and birds, and performing all domestic drudgery, an Assamese woman wove all the cloths needed for the whole family, spinning thread from cotton or silk-worms. It was for such roles of women in the family that male domination could not go to the extent of reducing them to the status of mere chattels. It was also for this reason, as well as, for the tribal base of the society, that social evils like seclusion of

of women, child marriage, practice of sati, ban on widow remarriage, etc. could not gain ground in Assam. Although among the upper-caste Hindus, marriage before puberty and ban on widow-remarriage prevailed, this could have slightest influence on the vast majority. On the other hand, the Ahom kings by recognising widow's right to landed property<sup>19</sup> and some of them by marrying the widows of their brothers<sup>20</sup> removed to a great extent the hindrances that could have worked through Hindu influence on the widow's right to marriage. Although parents generally looked for the birth of male issue, daughters were not treated as burdens, because there was no system of dowry in medieval Assam and so also in the present. Well-to-do parents no doubt, offered rich gifts to their daughters at the time of marriage, but there could never be any demand from the bride-groom's side. On the other hand, amongst many tribes, there was an opposite custom of paying bride-price or gadhan, which could be done either in the form of labour by the groom himself to the bride's family or gifting animals like cows, bison etc. to the latter. Under these circumstances, female infanticide could not even be dreamt of and the system of Sati remained a strage custom, with the result

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19. Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) made gifts of land to three women, Rahdai of Bhadai of Tipam and Aghuni of Solguri. H. Barbarua, Ahomar Din, Gauhati, 1981, P.226.

20 Swargadeo Lakshmi Singha (1769-80AD) married Kuranganayani the Manipuri consort of his brother Rajeswar Singha (1752-69AD) after the latter's death, -, Ibid, P.259.

that we have only one such case of our period, that of Sankardeva's mother, who willingly ascended her husband's funeral pyre<sup>21</sup>. Although Sankardeva and other Vaishnava reformers emphasised on women's chastity encouraging women to treat their husbands as Gods, this could not go to the extent of encouraging them to ascend the funeral pyres of the husbands.

On the other hand, we have examples even among the royal circles of the Kacharis and the Ahoms, who married the divorcees and sometimes took possession of somebody's wives. Thus Susudhi, (Garama Kunwari) who was originally married to the Kamata king, Nilambar (1490-98AD) after being divorced on the alleged ground of having amorous relation with the son of the family priest, was accepted as consort by the Kachari king Detsung and after the defeat of the Kacharis at the hands of the Ahoms, she passed her hands to the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingiya Raja (1497-1539), whose fondness of her is recorded in the buranjis<sup>22</sup>. There is also example of Swargadeo Jayadhwaj Singha's taking his chief queen's elder sister as wife, and adopting her son as his own<sup>23</sup>.

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21. U. Lekharu, (ed.), Katha-guru-Charita, Nalbari, 1964, P.24.

22. S.K. Bhuyan, (ed.), Asam Buranji (obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta, hence abbreviated, Sukumar Mahanta, Asam Buranji), Gauhati, 1960, P.17.

23. Ibid, P.70.

Such laxity in marital relations in the highest circles of the state went against the Vaishnava social maxims of wives paying unstinted devotion to their husbands.

Social and economic life in medieval Assam, as it is the case of all countries in all times, were influenced by geographical factors. The kingdom of Assam with which our study is concerned was about 500 miles in length and 60 miles in breadth<sup>24</sup>. It was bounded on three sides by high mountain ranges inhabited by different tribes of mainly Mongoloid origin, on the north by the Bhutanese, Akas, Duflas (Nishis) and Abors (Adis), on the east by the Mishimis and the Singhphos and on the south by the Garos, Khasis, Jaintias and the Nagas. The western boundary of the kingdom was the river Manaha which used to flow through the present district of Goalpara<sup>25</sup>. The Brahmaputra which was the life-giving river of Assam flowing through its heart divided it into two parts, called Uttarkul or the north bank and Dakhinkul or the south bank. Both the parts were fertile and washed by numerous tributaries of the Brahmaputra. The history and culture of Assam is intimately connected with the Brahmaputra. The history and culture of Assam is

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24. S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, Gauhati, 1949, P.1.

25. J.P. Wade, An Account of Assam, (ed.), B. Sarma, Gauhati, 1927, P.361.

~~intimately connected with the Brahmaputra.~~ Sands of many tributaries of the Brahmaputra like Suvansiri, Dikrai and Dhansiri contained gold dusts and many people were engaged in washing the sands for extracting gold. At the time of Mirjumla's invasion of Assam, ten to twelve thousand tolas of gold used to be extracted annually by washing the sands of different rivers<sup>26</sup>.

For the presence of rivers, people became expert in rowing boats and the naval strength of the kingdom became widely known. Catching of fish in the rivers and the lakes was taken as profession by the Kaivartas and the Nadiyals and fish was a common item in the menu of all classes of people. Women also used to catch fish in the ditches and in the over-flooded corn-fields in the rainy seasons by using different kinds of bamboo apparatus like jakai, khalai, khoka, julaki etc. ?

*Thaha*

The soil of Assam was exceedingly fertile and well adapted for all kinds of agricultural purposes, rice being the staple food of the people. The Persian chroniclers and the British writers were unanimous in their opinion regarding the natural beauty of Assam and richness of its soil. 'Assam' in the words of Manucci, "lies among mountains, and is a very fertile country, most luxuriant in food products and fruit, which are

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26. E. Gait, Op.cit., P.143.

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here found of various kinds, such as we have in Europe - that is pear, apples, peaches, grapes<sup>27</sup>. William Robinson considered Assam as one of the most beautiful countries of the world "studded with numerous clumps of hills rising abruptly from the general level and surrounded by lofty mountains, and intersected in all possible directions by innumerable streams and rivulets, which, issuing from the bordering mountains, at length empty themselves into the great channel of the Brahmaputra"<sup>28</sup>.

Assam was also very rich in flora and fauna. The surrounding forests were abound with valuable timbers like Agaru (Aloe wood), Sala (Shorea) and Chandana (Sandal wood) and animals like elephants and deer. The Mughals were particularly interested in its elephants and Agaru wood, the latter being an important article of trade between Assam and Mughal India. Catching of elephants and training them for the purpose of war was done in the Ahom kingdom, mainly by a section of the Moran tribe, called Hati Chungi. According to Shihabuddin Talish, the Chronicler of Mirjumla's Assam expedition of 1662-63, "the Assamese consider the sale of an elephant as the most disgraceful of acts and never commit it"<sup>29</sup>.

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27. Cited in S.K. Bhuyan, Atan Buragohain and His Times, 1957, P.21.

28. William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, New Delhi, 1981, P.4.

29. Fathiya-I-Ibriyah, cited in E. Gait, Op.cit., P.147.

European writers referred to Assam as "the sleepy hollow of Brahmaputra valley"<sup>30</sup>. The fertility of soil, coupled with damp climate and prolonged rainy season of nearly eight months of a year restricted mobility of the people and in early part of the British colonial rule, being heavily addicted to opium, they no doubt became indolent and lethargic. But in the days of the Ahoms, they were not so. On the other hand, Assamese soldiers had reputation for their energy, bravery and efficiency all over India. Amazed with their versatility, the Rajput general Raja Ram Singha had to admit that he had not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India<sup>31</sup>.

The Ahoms followed a policy of isolation towards the west, "as they feared that any relation with Mugal India might result in the loss of their territory or independent existence. Besides, they wanted to resist the intrusion of alien ideas from the west as they were guided primarily by the necessity of organizing the non-Aryan tribes of eastern Assam"<sup>32</sup>. Shihabuddin Talish thus described the seclusion of Assam : 'No Indian king in former times ever conquered Assam. Even the intercourse of the foreigners and the Assamese was very limited. They

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30. E. Gait, Op.cit., P.8.

31. S.K. Bhuyan, Atan Buragohain and His Times, P.19.

32. S.L. Baruah, Last Days of Ahom Monarchy, New Delhi, 1991, P.31.

allow no stranger to enter their territories, and they prevent their own people from leaving their country"<sup>33</sup>. The first Ahom king to break this isolation and to establish cultural relations with Delhi and other Hindu rulers of India was Rudra Singha (1696-1714)<sup>34</sup>. Following this cultural interaction, certain items of Mughal dress like jama (jacket), chauga (waist coat), Chapkan (long shirt) and musical performances like Nagera first entered the Ahom court and later the Satras<sup>35</sup>.

The population of Assam before the Moamaria Rebellion and the Burmese invasion which brought extinction of the Ahom monarchy was estimated at about two million and a half<sup>36</sup>. This does not seem to be an exaggerated figure, because with a population less than this, it would not have been possible for Rudra Singha to mobilise an army of four lakhs consisting of the mul or first levy of soldiers from a got or unit of four paiks, for his proposed expedition against Mughal Bengal<sup>37</sup> sometime in 1714 A.D. Prof. Amalendu Guha, making all possible estimates has come to the suggestive conclusion

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33. Fathiya-I-Ibriyah, cited in E. Gait, Op.cit., P.144.

34. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), Satsari Asam Buranji, Gauhati University, 1969, P. 119, S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), Tungkhungia Buranji, Gauhati, 1968, PP.32,33.

35. For Details see, A. Sattar, Sansmrisanat Asamiya Sanskriti, Jorhat, 1965, P.49.

36. G.R. Barua, Asam Bandhu, Calcutta, 1885, Vol.I, No.1, P.3.

37. S.K. BHuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, PP.5,6.

'that actual population of the Ahom territories up to the Manas ranged from 2 to 3 million over the 150 years ending 1750'<sup>38</sup>.

People living in the plains had usually friendly relations with the tribes in the foot hill regions. However, to prevent incursions of the hill tribes, the Ahom kings followed different policies of black mail, certain conciliatory measures and when the situation so demanded, application of force. To carry on trade with the hill tribes, marts were established at the foot hills, where the hill people exchanged their products for certain articles of the plains. Of all the hill tribes, relation with the Nagas, the Khairamis or Khasis and the Jaintias was more intimate. The regular contact between the inhabitants of the plains and the hills had its cultural impact. Some customs and beliefs prevalent in the Assamese society came from the neighbouring tribes. For instance, the Naga belief in a perilous path which is required to be passed by the spirit of the dead is also prevalent among the Assamese village folk. The Assamese custom of taking unripe areca nut was adopted from the Khasis. Much like the tribes, the house-hold of a Hindu Assamese is put under a period of uncleanness during child birth, death of an inmate

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38. T. Roychowdhury and I.Habib, (ed.), The Cambridge Economic History, Vol.1, Cambridge University Press, 1982, P.498.

and the menstruation of a woman, when certain rules are followed by the individuals or the family concerned. The stoppage of field work on certain days of a month followed by the tribes can be compared with the Hindu practice of restricting ploughing on days like ekadasi or the sankranti<sup>39</sup>.

The dominant religions of medieval Assam were Saivism, Saktism, Tantrikism and Neo-Vaishnavism. With the spread of the last through the Vaishnava saints beginning with Sankardeva, a vast majority of the common people were sanskritized or brought to the fold of Hinduism. Even then, the worship of the tribal God Siva and the Tantrik rites continued. The early Ahom kings patronised both Saivism and Saktism and even after their formal acceptance of neo-Vaishnavism they continued their patronage to these faiths. At the same time, they were respectful of their traditional priests - the Deodhais and the Bailungs. There was a spirit of toleration among the adherents of different faiths and in a single place, images of different deities were set up and on the same place, temples dedicated to deities of different sects were erected.

In the non-institutionalised religion of the tribes like animism and fetishism, women played more

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39. P.C. Choudhury, Op.cit., P.392.

important or equal roles with men. But with the growth of institutionalised religion, the leading parts were taken over by women, and women were allotted only subordinate roles. Neo-Vaishnavism by teaching that women were at the root of all evils and serious obstacles towards attaining salvation, strengthened male domination in the Hindu society and inspired women of the Hinduised societies to surrender their individual rights and merge their identities with men.

Formation and organisation of state being mainly a work of malefolk, women were left outside the arena of politics in all societies of the world. Even at present, women's leadership and role in the political field is very marginal. Not to speak of patriarchal societies, in the matriarchal societies of the Khasis and the Garos also, women were not admitted to political deliberations, which were considered solely as men's arena. Under the circumstances, women could play only indirect roles in politics and administration. However, there are examples of three queens of Siva Singha (1714-1744) who took the regalia to their hands one after another.

Thus the Assamese society and culture which originated as a result of fusion of different races of

Aryan and non-Aryan elements got a distinct identity and a concrete shape under the Ahoms, who added new elements to it and made it more catholic and broad-based. The Ahoms not only integrated Assam politically and made it a power to be reckoned with the medieval India, but also promoted social cohesion and cultural integration. While they were performing this task from above, the Vaishnava reformers were doing it from below at the grass-root level. It was for this that communal harmony in Assam remained so strong that even in the bitter days of the partition of the country on the eve of Independence from British colonial rule on August 15, 1947, it was left untouched by communal riots; and despite the recent workings of divisive forces created by political circles, people, in general, are living in amity and harmony.

#### Aims and Objectives and Perimeter of the Study :

Social history is of recent growth in our country. In Assam historical studies till some years back were mainly confined to diplomatic relations or political events. But once the ball on social history was set on rolling, it is becoming increasingly popular and broad-based. It is by studying a society in all its perspectives that people's role in the making of a nation, a state or a culture can be best understood. In the context of Assam, which like the rest of India is a melting-pot of

different human strains and cultures, social history is very important and relevant.

The Assamese society or culture being a composite ~~one~~, it is very difficult to distinguish the elements as belonging to this or that particular race or community. Growth of culture, which is a dynamic process receives all necessary ingredients from different castes, tribes or ethnic groups. However, there is no denying the fact that in the formation of the Assamese society, the non-Aryan ethnic groups played a preponderant role giving distinctiveness to its culture. As commented by P.C. Choudhury "It is due to the admixture of these (tribes) elements and the mutual influence of one upon the other that Assamese culture, though fundamentally allied to that of India, has retained its separate entity with local variations"<sup>40</sup>. This work therefore aims at studying the formation and growth of the Assamese society from the fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan or tribal and Hindu elements under the patronage of the Ahom rulers and through the works of the Vaishnava preceptors studying in the context the status of women and the contributions made by them towards the formation and growth of the Assamese society and culture.

Women, like ~~peasants~~ and artisans, have also remained 'subaltern' in all countries of the world. Their

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40. Ibid, P.310.

role in history is hardly focussed. Historical studies in Assam till date are confined only to the elite women like queens, wives of ministers, priests etc. They appear and disappear in the panorama of history. It is the common women, who along with their male counterparts continually and silently contribute to the progress of society. Our objective is therefore to make these 'invisible' unnamed women 'visible' along with the elite characters of history. To understand the problem in the broader context of social formation and development, composition of the population complex in the medieval Assamese society, their manners and customs, economy, polity, education and learning and religious rites and beliefs are discussed in separate chapters. Reference to art and architecture are also made at relevant places but due to limitations in the scope of the work a separate discussion on this subject as well as on music and dance have been avoided. Political history has been briefly discussed only to understand the social formation and the elements of continuity and change in the culture of the period.

### Survey of Literature

Although there are one or two chapters on the social and economic conditions of medieval Assam in the writings of some historians of the past and the present century, no separate work on social history as such has

yet been taken up. The tradition of studying social and economic condition along with political history was started in Assam by Haliram Dhekial Phukan, who in his Asam Buranji<sup>41</sup> written in Bengali in 1829 devoted several chapters to it. Kashi Nath Tamuli Phukan<sup>42</sup> and Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin<sup>43</sup> also touched upon social stratification from the view point of the aristocracy. However, it was Hiteswar Barbarua, who in his Ahomar Din<sup>44</sup> dealt with a few aspects of the social and economic history of medieval Assam. Gait's work was primarily a political history. The chapters on social and economic conditions were added by B.K. Barua and H.V.S. Murthy while editing his work in 1959. Hamilton<sup>45</sup> and Robinson<sup>46</sup> helped us a great deal to understand the population complex and manners and customs of the people. U.N. Gohain's Assam under the Ahoms<sup>47</sup> contain valuable information regarding the economic condition of medieval Assam. M. Neog in his Purani Asamiya Samaj aru Sanskriti<sup>48</sup> (in Assamese) discusses briefly some aspects of social life of medieval Assam. N.K. Basu in his Assam in the Ahom Age<sup>49</sup> takes up social and economic conditions

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41. Calcutta, 1829.

42. Asam Buranji (ed.), P.C. Choudhury, Gauhati, 1964.

43. Asam Buranji (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati, 1962.

44. Gauhati, 1981 PP.389-526.

45. An Account of Assam (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati, 1963.

46. A Descriptive Account of Assam, New Delhi, 1981.

47. Jorhat, 1942.

48. Gauhati, 1971.

49. Calcutta, 1970.

of the period. J.N. Phukan, in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis The Economic History of Assam Under the Ahoms<sup>50</sup> treats the economic conditions of the period. S.L. Barua's A Comprehensive History of Assam<sup>51</sup> contains a chapter on the social and economic life of medieval Assam, where the main trends are briefly discussed. S.N. Sarma's A Socio Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam<sup>52</sup> and S. Rajguru's Medieval Assamese Society<sup>53</sup>, impart immense facilities to the readers to have an idea of medieval Assamese society. J. Borgohain's two recent publications in Assamese, namely Asamar Arthanitir Itihas<sup>54</sup> and Asamar Sanskritir Itihas<sup>55</sup> discuss briefly the growth of Assam's economy and culture respectively under the Ahoms. In the very recent work of Amalendu Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam<sup>56</sup>, society, polity and economy of the period are discussed from new angles. But no one has yet studied the medieval Assamese society with special reference to the status of women. This is, therefore, the first work in this field which correlates social history with woman's studies.

#### Data Analysis and Methodology

Our main sources consist of the Assamese chronicles called Buranjis, contemporary religious and

50. Ph.D. Thesis submitted to Gauhati University in 1973.

51. New Delhi, 1985, PP.414-454.

52. Gauhati, 1989.

53. Nagaon, 1988.

54. Jorhat, 1985.

55. Jorhat, 1989.

56. Calcutta, 1990.

secular literature and inscriptions of different kings. Not only the published chronicles, a few manuscript chronicles are also studied. The literary works of Sankardeva like Kirtana Ghosa, Rukmini Haran, Parijat Haran etc., the Nam Ghosa of Madhavdeva and the writings of other Vaishnava preceptors like Ramcharan Thakur, Aniruddhadeva and others give us a glimpse of certain aspects of medieval Assamese society and a clear idea of their attitude towards women. Other contemporary Vaishnava literature like the Guru Charita or biographies of Vaishnava saints and Satriya Buranjis called Vamsavalis contain valuable information on the topic. Persian chronicles like the Fathiya-I-Ibriyah<sup>57</sup> and the Alamgirnamah<sup>58</sup> throw valuable light on the subject. Descriptions and coins of the period supply important information on the economy and certain aspects of social organizations of the period. They also contain evidences regarding women's right to landed property, sale of women in open markets etc. Accounts of early British officers like that of Robinson help us to get a picture of the social life including status of women.

But the information found in all these sources are fragmentary and in some cases they are also

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57. Trans. by Sir. J.N. Sarkar in JBORS, Vol.I, Part.II, Dec,1915, Reproduced in E.Gait, Op.cit., PP.141-51.

58. By Mirza Muhammad Qazim, Trans. by M. Vansittart in Asiatic Researches, Vol.II, New Delhi, 1979.

contradictory. These sources are therefore carefully examined and analysed comparing one with the others. Our knowledge are supplemented by folk literature and oral literature in the form of ballads, wedding songs or Bia Nam, Ai-Nam, Bihu-Nam, nursery rhymes, proverbs etc. Some of these are collected through personal interviews with some aged ladies and gentlemen of some villages of the present districts of Golaghat, Jorhat and Sibsagar.

With the help of these sources, an attempt is made in this work to study critically the society of medieval Assam giving particular emphasis on the status of women. In each chapter at relevant places the role of women in the making of the society and culture and on its evolution has been discussed. It is expected that such studies will help us to understand the growth of our civilization in a more comprehensive way and the indispensable role played by women in it.

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## CHAPTER - VIII

### CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, we have discussed the formation of the Assamese society in the medieval times and various aspects of it with special reference to the role and status of women in the medieval Assamese society. The entire period of medieval Assam extending from the thirteenth to the beginning of the 19th century was marked by conflicts, either domestic or foreign, with short periods of interruptions. The foreign powers with whom the rulers of the Brahmaputra valley had clash of arms were the Turko-Afghans and the Mughals and later the Burmese. Of the internal rebellions, the most important was that of the Moamorias, which eventually led to the fall of the Ahom monarchy. All these conflicts had their impact on the role and status of women in the society.

During this period of war and conflicts, the menfolk were naturally busy with military or semi-military activities. Although under the paik system, recruitment of three paiks from a unit of four was made only under exceptional circumstances, recruitment of half the unit also meant burden to the remaining two as they had to cultivate the lands of their servicing comrades, besides doing their own. Again war situation demanded more production of food crops, fibres, war materials etc.

Women therefore had to be engaged in producing some materials like cotton or silk thread and help their husbands in making bows and arrows etc. In an early chapter it has been stated that during the days of Pratap Singha, his Bar Barua, Momai Tamuli made it a rule that a woman before going to bed must spin a bundle of thread and a man must make a basket.

Next morning, king's officers collected these materials and those failing to do it without sufficient reason were punished. That was a period of conflict with the Mughals and the situation demanded that women should produce some of the necessaries for war. During this period, menfolk being mostly engrossed in military activities, they had to depend to a great extent on the help and co-operation of women in managing their family affairs and fulfilling their obligations to the state. Under such circumstances, women could convincingly demonstrate their useful role in the society, whose co-operation was very valuable in securing prosperity, peace and victory in war. It is even related in the Satsari Asam Buranji that on one occasion the Assamese women beat the fleeing Muslim soldiers with bamboo rods.<sup>1</sup> The heroic role played by Mula Gabharu, who died fighting against the Muslim general Turbak has been narrated. Such women from the upper classes were source of inspiration

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1. Satsari Asam Buranji, p.28

to the common womenfolk. In the Moamaria rebellion, it was under the leadership of Radha and Rukmini that the rebels of the Moran villages refused to the king's men to cut timbers in their locality. When rebellion broke out, they were on the first line of the army.<sup>2</sup> They did not finish their jobs with that. After the Moamarias assumed power they became engaged in constructive work. Rukmini went far to Gauhati to take constructive works there, where she was killed,<sup>3</sup> when the Ahom monarchy restored power. Examples of Radha and Rukmini were followed by others, and when the Moamarias again rose into rebellion during the days of Gaurinath Singh, hundreds of them like Bhanumoti, Bhadrawati, Rambha, Jayanti, etc. came out from their homes and joined the menfolk to take arms against the oppressing government.<sup>4</sup> Under such situation, women were not only equal partners of men but also productive and valuable members of the society. As such, they could not be treated with an air of patronage or contempt.

Women were not only very useful media in diplomatic overtures but they were also exploited for war strategy. Thus it is recorded that when Parikshit, son of Chilarai rose in rebellion against his uncle Maharaja Nara Narayan, he sent his queens in the first line of the

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2. Tungkhungia Buranji, p.61

3. Ibid, p.75

4. C.Goswami, Aniruddha Devar Charit Aru Mayamara Satrar Vamsawali, Tinsukia, 1931, vv.859,860

army to face his uncle's soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The situation was very delicate and the king's soldiers, at his instruction, abstained from taking up their arms. Parikshit thus was not required to fight and got for him part of the kingdom through negotiations with his uncle.

In all the peace overtures, princess or maidens of the noble families were offered to the victors by the vanquished. Examples have already been cited to the offering of Ramani Gabharu, the daughter of the king Jayadhaj Singha and Mohini Aideo, the daughter of the Tipam Raja to the Mughal harem as a sequel to the treaty of Ghilajarighat following Mir Jumla's expedition to Assam. In a like way, the Manipuri princess Kuranganayani was received by the Ahom Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha, as a reward for the help given by him to the Manipur King Jaysingha, to recover his throne from the hands of the Burmese. Again, to court Burmese alliance and to maintain cordial relations with them, Ahom kings and nobles offered a number of Assamese maidens to the Burmese court, some of whom, as narrated, had exercised considerable influence upon the person of the king and thereby played an important role in the Assam-Burma relations of the period. Again, sometimes, women were

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5. Darrang Raj Vamsawali, v.711

used for initiating hostilities. We have such one instance. The Jayantia king Jasa Manik was not in good terms with the Kachari king Pratap Narayan. Unable to humiliate the kachari king of his own, the Jayantia king wanted to do it diplomatically through the Ahom Swargadeo, Pratap Singha. He therefore offered his daughter to the Swargadeo and requested him that she should be escorted through the Kachari Kingdom and not through the usual route through Raha.<sup>6</sup> This was ultimately done and the Kachari king was humiliated. The instrument used was thus a woman.

The diplomatic overtures cemented by marriage alliance were accompanied by cultural give and take. When the king of Gaur offered two of his daughters, Harmoti and Darmoti, to Ahom Swargadeo, Suhungmung, they took with them new cultural elements.<sup>7</sup> In a like way, Kuranganayani was accompanied by a number of attendants who were settled at a place called Magolukhat near the Ahom capital.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, a market sprang up there, where Manipuri articles were sold. Again, the Nara queen Chauching of Swargadeo Suklengmung brought a number of

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6. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), Jaintia Buranji, Gauhati, 1964, Intro.p.XII

7. Sukumar Mahanta, Asam Buranji, p.20

8. H. Barbaruah, Op.Cit., p.251, G.R. Barua, Op.Cit., p.121

elements with her to be assimilated with the Assamese culture.<sup>9</sup> The Naga and the Jaintia princesses in a like way brought their own cultural elements to the Ahom court to be absorbed to the fabric of Assamese culture. In fact, there are references in the contemporary Assamese literature to pearls like manpuwal which were definitely brought by the Naga wives of the Ahom Swargadeos.<sup>10</sup>

Assamese princesses and maidens offered to the neighbouring rulers in a like way not only exercised their influence upon the person of the king but had also helped in the process of cultural assimilation in those countries. There are references to the Assamese consorts of the Burmese monarchs Badawpaya, (1781-1819 A.D.) and Bagyidawa (1819-1837 A.D.). Mention has already been made to Rangili, who greatly helped Badan Chandra to procure Burmese help. After Badan Chandra became the Premier or Mantri Phukan with Burmese help in 1817, he rewarded the Burmese Emperor Badawpaya by offering him a maiden named Hemo Aideo. She was accompanied not only by her companions and slaves but also by 500 Assamese soldiers (paiks) with their families and also by her elder brother Bihuram. She was made the chief queen of the Burmese Emperor. After that she took her mother and her another

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9. Sukumar Mahanta, Asam Buranji, p.27

10. M. Neog, Purani Asamiya Samaj Aru Sanskrit, p.134

elder brother Dhaniram to Burma. Dhaniram, at her instance, was made the governor of a place called Mogaung and Bihuram become a 'mintha' or minister. The five hundred Assamese soldiers with their families were also settled at Mogaung. They, for long retained Assamese manners and customs but in course of time got assimilated with the Burmese. Hemo Aideo was called by the Burmese 'Bhamo Mapaya' and in her honour a city was built called Bhamo Nagar.<sup>11</sup> Later, her niece, i.e. Bihuram's daughter was married by the Burmese Emperor and for her also a city called Madai Nagar was established.<sup>12</sup> Jogeswar Singha, who was made king of Assam by the Burmese in 1821 was also a brother of Hemo Aideo.<sup>13</sup> After the second Burmese invasion was over, another Assamese maiden, named Upama Aideo was offered to the Emperor.<sup>14</sup> She too was accompanied by a number of attendants and friends. All of them were settled at a place called Aideo Nagar.<sup>15</sup> The names of these places still remind the Burmese people of their cultural relations with the Assamese. Thus Assamese woman became media of cultural give and take between Assam and the neighbouring countries. It is

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11. H.Barbarua, Op.Cit., pp.304ff

12. Ibid,

13. S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo Assamese Relations, p.484

14. Ibid, pp.473ff

15. H. Barbarua, Op.Cit., pp.305ff

recorded in the Buranjis how Swargadeo Supimpha gave up his consort for her making comment on a Naga Khumbao (Chief) as handsome.<sup>16</sup> The royal consort was given shelter by the Naga Khunbao, at whose residence she gave birth to a son, who eventually became the first Bar Patra Gohain or the third great councillor or minister of the Ahom administration. The royal consort, no doubt, carried with her some advance cultural elements and strengthened the tie between the hills and the plains. It has been discussed how three queens of medieval Assam took the actual reins of government to their hands, most prominent of them being Bar-rajā Phuleswari. It is generally argued that Phuleswari sowed the seeds of ruin of the Ahom monarchy by persecuting the Moamarias. But a careful examination of the events show that persecution of the Moamarias started before Phuleswari and a number of Moamaria Mahantas were executed at the orders of her predecessors.<sup>17</sup> She had simply taken a follow-up measure. In fact, it was Kirti Chandra Barbarua who by his arrogance and injustice had precipitated the rebellion. While criticizing Phuleswari for her neophytic zeal, one should not be blind to her qualities as a patron of education and learning, her public works, her intelligence and her resoluteness.

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16. Ibid, p.44, Kasinath Tamuli Phukon, Asam Buranji, p.21

17. S.L. Barua, Op.Cit., pp.301ff

As stated earlier, during the period under survey, we can not expect common women to be conscious of political rights, when the same did not exist among the menfolk. But whereas the menfolk were allowed to participate in diplomatic talks, women were denied the right. This is clear from the following incident. During the period of the Ahom-Mughal wars, Raja Satrajit, the thanadar of Pandu, had sent his five year old son and the child's nurse to the Ahom court to pay respects to king Pratap Singha. When the king ordered his officer to accord a formal reception to them, the later declined, saying : 'The son of Satrajit is a mere stripling, besides he has been accompanied by a woman only. He is therefore unfit to come to the court. How can I carry on conversation with a mere lad and a woman ?'<sup>18</sup> The kings usually did not discuss political matters with their consorts. Some even considered women as cause of men's sorrow and sufferings. Gaurma Kunwari's husband, the king of Kamata, on learning of his consort's illicit relations with the son of the royal priest expelled her from the court. This act would inevitably lead to a war with the king of Gaur, his father-in-law. He therefore observed : "The death of Raja Dasaratha was due to his wife; and the great Lord Sri Ram underwent travails and sufferings on

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18. Sukumar Mahanta, Asam Buranji, Intro., p.xl.

account of Sita. Where can a golden deer be found ? Huge forests are destroyed by conflagrations along with the animals and birds."<sup>19</sup>

But despite all barriers, there were women, who by dint of their intelligence and superior qualities could exercise remarkable influence in the politics of the period. Reference has already been made to Chaoching Kunwari and the Bar-rajā Phuleswari. Again, women particularly of the upper classes, were aware of the political affairs. It would be wrong for us to suppose that Jaymati's self-sacrifice was bereft of any political awareness. Being the daughter of an Ahom noble, the Bar Gohain Laithepena, the second great minister of Ahom administration and the daughter-in-law of a deposed king,<sup>20</sup> she was well aware of the political situation of the kingdom and was greatly confident that her husband was the man of the hour to set things in order. Her resoluteness, courage and self sacrifice is a source of inspiration not only to the Assamese women but to any woman of any part of the world. It was for this reason that when non-violent non-cooperation movement was in progress in Assam, Assamese nationalists took up her example as one most befitting to teach the principle to

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19. Sukumar Mahanta, Asam Buranji, Intro. p. xxxii

20. Her father-in-law Gobar sat on the Ahom throne for a few days in January 1675, but was deposed by a section of Ahom aristocrats to put an end to the unscrupulous designs of Debera Barua, Tungkhungia Buranji, Intro. p. xvii

to the Assamese womenfolk and henceforth Jaymati Utsab, or death anniversary of Jāymati had become greatly popular and continues to be performed till today.

But it was the socio-economic factors which laid the foundation of the political structure. Despite the moulding force of Sanskritization, Assamese society at its rock bottom retained its tribal base. When tribal states grew up one after another, tribal elements became more preponderant than ever before. Sanskritization led to detribalization. The ruling families also after their getting Sanskritized helped in the process of Sanskritization which was greatly accelerated by the Vaishnava reformers. But some tribal elements were too strong and deep rooted to be overtaken or ignored by Sanskritization. As a result, there took place assimilation of tribal and sanskritic elements which gave birth to the composite Assamese culture.

Of the strong tribal elements, one was the status given to women. Most of the tribal societies of Assam long continued to be matrilineal. Leaving aside the Garos and the Khasis of the neighbouring hills, among the whom matriliney still exists, some Bodo groups like the Mishings and the Kacharis, as stated earlier, still retain some remnants of their once matrilineal organization. The Karbis or the Mikirs long continued

to be matrilineal.<sup>21</sup> As high respect was paid to woman in those societies, she could not be completely deprived of her rights and freedom even after the matrilineal societies gave way to patriarchal ones. As a result, woman in tribal societies preserved her right to choose her partner in life, to remarry after the death of her husband and to move freely. In fact, the free movement of the Assamese women astonished the Persian chroniclers like Shihabuddin Talish, who was fain to make the following comment, 'The wives of the Rajas and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody and they move about in the market places with bare heads.'<sup>22</sup> As stated, it was for the tribal base of the society that certain practices and customs like child marriage and dowry could never become popular in Assam.

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that there was no exploitation of women by men in the Assamese society. On the other hand, with the progress of Sanskritization, *zhuming* was giving way to ploughing and patriarchal societies were gradually supplanting matrilineal set-ups. Among some upper-class women in the lower Brahmaputra valley, seclusion or purdah also came

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21. S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo Assamese Relations, p.45

22. E. Gait, Op.Cit., p.146

to be practised, which was evidently at the impact of the neighbouring Mughal Bengal. During the period of internal disturbances beginning with the first Moamaria rebellion in 1679 till the inauguration of the British rule in 1826, the menfolk themselves being insecure of their own lives ill-treated their wives and daughters. It was during this period, that many even sold their wives. The lot of women during this period was miserable. Babies were taken away from the laps of their mothers and mothers were forced to accompany the Burmese soldiers to their lands, some to be accepted as wives and some to be employed as slaves. During the days of Burmese Rule in Assam, it was dangerous for a beautiful woman to meet a Burmese even on the public road. But while life of women, in general, became insecure, 'fathers of damsels whom the Burmese took to wives, rose speedily to affluence and power.'<sup>23</sup> Even after normalcy returned, the rights and privileges which women lost during that period of confusion and anarchy could not be seen restored. On the other hand, tired of the weals and woes of life, menfolk in general, appear to seek consolation in the philosophy of renunciation. Some others grew very rough and arrogant. Woman owing to her physical weakness became

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23. Asamar Padya Buranji, pp.172-80; S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, pp.509ff.

victims of such arrogance and hot temper. One such picture is portrayed by Lakhinath Bez Barua in his short story 'Bhadari'. She was struck on her back by a fishing knife by her arrogant husband for her inability to serve him food immediately after his coming from the rice-field.<sup>24</sup>

It has also been found that women were exploited or persecuted in the name of religion. In theory, she was a goddess, her divine counterpart being worshipped in various manifestations. But reality betrayed the ideal. Often women fell victims of the religious whims and caprices of the priests and menfolk. The institution of devadasis in that connection has already been related. This was also patronised by the state. For propitiating the worship of Kamakhya and Kesaikhati annually twelve and twenty four human beings used to be sacrificed respectively at these temples.<sup>25</sup> In fact, for offering human sacrifice in the Kesaikhati temple, there was a special class of people. These people enjoyed the right to have sexual union with any woman they liked, before they were sacrificed to the goddess. Evidently, some women in the name of religion became the victims of such horrible practices.

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24. Bez Barua Granthwali, Part I, Gauhati, 2nd reprint, 1988, pp.644-646

25. P.Gogoi(ed), Lik-Phan-Tai, Vol.I,1966,Tai History and Cultural Society of Assam, Gauhati, p.91,cf.S.L.Baruah, Op.Cit., 252.

It is true that neo-Vaishnavite movement by its teaching of monotheism and worship through Namkirtan had reformed the Assamese society. After Sankardeva's death, his apostoles like Madhavdeva and Gopal Ata took up the missionary work and spread the tenets among all the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley and in the foot hill-areas. The cosmopolitan outlook of the new creed with emphasis on universal social brotherhood and community prayer greatly appealed to the masses. The new creed, Mahapurushiya or Eka Sarana Nama Dharma as it was popularly called, soon became the religion of the people. But the later Vaishnava preachers deviated from original teachings of Sankardeva. They strictly observed the caste-rules and also neglected their missionary duties. As a result, many people again reverted to the Tantric rites, although they were disciples of the Vaishnava order. Tantric rites did not observe caste-rules and gave an honoured status to women. Women also therefore participated in the Tantric rites. But Tantrikism allowed some illicit practices which had evil effect on women's status in the society.

During the period of the Moamariya Rebellion, a large number of women and children were tortured and killed simply because they belonged to a particular religious order which protested against the Ahom government. The two woman leaders of the Moamariya

Rebellion, Radha and Rukmini were ruthlessly killed by the royalists so also the female members of the Moamoria Mahanta. Such relation between state, religion and politics which perpetuating male domination and female servility working as great hindrance to the progress of the society forms by itself a valuable topic of research.

Thus women in Assam like her counterparts in other parts of the country had to struggle hard and is still struggling hard to get her due status in the society. It may be noted that Manu and Yajnavalkya, although they had strongly deprecated women, had also prescribed that they should be kept in comfort and happiness. Thus writes Manu : 'Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields any reward.'<sup>26</sup> Yajnavalkya, for instance, 'extols women so much as to call them embodiments of all divine virtues on earth. God has showered all his brilliance to make them, the most attractive and most honoured in the world.'<sup>27</sup>

Menfolk in, the Hindu Assamese society in general, however, appear to always insist on Manu's instruction regarding restriction of women's movement. They wanted to establish their superiority over women. Beginning with the period of internal confusion and disorder of the late 18th century Assamese women had to

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26. Manu Samhita, 111-51, cf. Indra, Op.Cit., p.5

27. Yajnavalkya Smriti, 1-71, cf. India, Op.Cit., p.5

submit unhesitatingly to male domination. Most of the Assamese intellectuals of the nineteenth century were not sympathetic to women. Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin looked upon women as selfish, cruel, power-loving and source of men's misery.<sup>28</sup> The editor of an Assamese magazine called Mau, who strongly disfavoured women's education commented that if women were to get education like men, devastations greater than the Burmese invasions would befall the country.<sup>29</sup> Menfolk, in general, therefore wanted to keep women confined to the kitchen and the field. But within no time they came forward to repair their losses and get their due privileges and honour in the society. Gandhiji's call to women to participate in the country's struggle for independence served as an inspiration towards her liberation from male domination and blind traditions. Assamese women fully responded to the call of the 'Father of the Nation' and contributed their share to that historic movement. This is however, a subject beyond the scope of this work.

For the tribal base of the society, feudal elements could not become strong, although a sort of feudal land relationship grew up in the Satra institution. But there was rigid class distinction both

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28. Sadar Amin, Asam Buranji, p.16,71,85.

29. The Mau, December 1886, Reprint, Gauhati, 1980, p.7

in the state and the satra organization. Caste differences were also there, although caste rules were not rigid as they had been in other parts of India to the effect that there was no untouchability in Assam in any period of its history. Hinduised tribes depending upon the extent of their Sanskritisation claimed superiority over others and refused to have marriage relations even with the member of their own caste if they were less Hinduised. A clear example of this is furnished by the Hindu-Chutiyas, who long became so complete Sanskritised that they stopped having marriage relations even with the members of their traditional priestly families, namely the Decris, the latter being now recognised as a scheduled tribe. Class and caste-structure in medieval Assam showing the impact of Sanskritisation on the process could thus be a very important topic of research.

Notwithstanding all these, society of medieval Assam was marked by its catholicity and openness. The heterogenous culture of different tribes got assimilated through a natural process and formed a homogenous Assamese culture to which a definite shape was given by the Ahom government from the top and the Vaisnava preceptors from the bottom. The Assamese society and its values growing out of the assimilations of Aryan and non-

Aryan or tribal and non-tribal races and elements no doubt conform to the mainstream of the Indian society and culture but it has its own distinctiveness exhibited in different aspects including the social status of women which gives an identity as Assamese.

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