CHAPTER EIGHT

ROLE AND STATUS OF THE TRIBAL WOMEN IN THEIR SOCIETIES.

The North-East India is, in the main, a land of Tribes. Situated in the north eastern part of India, Assam is a province with a colourful and composite society and culture. The divergent tribal groups from the part of the great Assamese society and culture. These tribal communities are lying scattered various parts of Assam, extending from the plains of Assam to the inaccessible hilly areas of Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong district, Adis or Abors, Galongs, Akas, Dafalas, and Naktes of A.P., Misings, Boros, Rabhas, Deoris Karbis, Tiwas or Lalungs and Sonowal Kocharies of Assam from time immemorial. Assam is the home of these tribal races and through hard struggle for existence not only they have developed and maintained traditional cultures of their own. But they have ceaselessly sacrifice and been contributing to the social, religious, politcal and economical spheres of the society.

A society is a sweet composition of men and women. The growth of the society in all aspect of living solely depends upon the proportionate sincere efforts of man and women. The well advanced societies contribute to the prosperity and progress of the nation to demand it's legitimate position in the competitive world of development. So, Modern scientific approach in every sector of our devel-
opmental plans would ensure better peace and progress. It has failed to mobilise the vast potential resources remained un-utilised through ages by confining itself behind the screen in the so called tradition bound society that is tribal society, nothing but the women resources. The history of India is full of examples as regards the dedication, sacrifice and services rendered by the Indian women for the interest of country and nation when they are given right position with honour. Gandhiji said "women with the natural, mental strength of their own are fellow travellers of men. Women are the masters of their own trades in the same way the men are". This observation of Bapuji is applicable to all the tribal women. To the all round development of the society the tribal women are contributing in their own ways. In the preservation of art and culture of the tribal society, the tribal women have a perennial place with an adequate promise of a bright future for the society.

The role and status of the tribal women is usually determined by a number of parameters which include, inter alia, property inheritance, quantum of work load, participation in decision making process, freedom of choosing life partner, level of educational attainment, access to modern occupation and the level of freedom in socio-economic fields. On the otherhand, social life, social norms and observations, agriculture, animal husbandry; weaving, dress and Jewellery, preparation of tribal wine, earning livelihood taking part in the co-operative society, taking care of and giving education to the children are the chief roles, the women are to carry out in their social and domestic life.
The role and status of tribal women is dominating through not recognised in their tradition bound society. The following main features can give clear vision about their role and status. These are:

1. SOCIAL:

Social structure, cultural norms, value systems are important determinants of women's roles and their position in society. Indian society being mainly male dominated paternal society, where boy has to inherit father's property, girls naturally are the less important members of the family. There women has always to perform a secondary and less important role in the family and is never given freedom to be independent. But there are very few matrilineal communities which are mainly in the north-eastern and south western region and women's social status in these societies is much higher than patrilineal society. Except these societies, in other societies, women in her childhood she has to stay under the domination of her father and brothers in her adulthood under her husband and in her old age under her son. Even now a days also when women literacy has increased to a considerable extent, the position of women has not much changed. So many restrictions are imposed upon her which she is bound to follow.

On the other hand, although the constitution has granted equal right of inheritance to both sons and daughters, quite a good number of tribal women still perceive that daughters should not inherit
paternal property. In some societies of course, in the absence of sons, a daughter is permitted to inherit the property of her father, but in such case, her husband comes to stay with her father and it is rare in the society. It is observed that the tribal women have no property right in the family and land rights. Even they are not given priority to the tribal women in their society for the decision making in the family. The tribals have their own traditional customs for their own functioning society, they will do what their tribal male dominators will say and they are bound to obey. Another the taboo prevalent in their traditional society of not allowing a male child to touch the inner garments of women or passing through the place where these are hung, this is also followed with much strictness. Such attitudes towards women of considering her as lowly creature had its impact in her status in the family and socio-political life.

But, in return to the above, though the tribal women are denied of social justice in enjoying status of liberty like experiences etc. Yet, vast role and responsibility that the tribal women play in establishing a sound social base and they are not inferior in any comparision with men in the field of all achievements. They play a vital role in preserving the social values prescribed and followed since the unknown periods by the tribal communities. Hospitality, sincerity affectionate dealing and obedience to superors are the very rare qualities that the tribal women give priority in social living. Voluntary cooperation among each other in distress tragedy. Commitment of words and open hearted exchange of feeling and deep affinity to social customs in ceremonies and festivals are the special role that
the tribal women pay personal honour to safeguard it. The nature of sacrifice for others in the family and community is very inspiring among tribal women. Without any rest and break the object of the tribal women is to see the society in peace within a limited resources that they can afford according to their strength as they are not habituated in complicated nature of social living.

On the other hand in tribal societies family plays the major role in socialisation, occupational training, religious beliefs, social customs, cultural norms and values all are basically learnt within the family the children, specially the girls are assigned to their respective roles in the socio-economic system according to their ages. The tribal families have to perform quite a number of rituals, social functions, marriage and religious festivals throughout the year. In some of their (Boro) religious functions or festivals like Kherai puza, the role of women as "Doudini" is main. the doudini is the key dancer during the Kherai Puza. Some other religious festivals continue for a number of days during which large number of relatives, friends and other invitees participate and all of them are entertained with food and drinks. In fact such religious functions become a huge community feast, which involve considerable amount of human labour specially female section and as such they are trained up.

However, because of the crucial role she plays in and out side the family for the society the rate of victimisation is very low in modern times as both and women exclusively depends with each other to lead a life of peace. The provision of divorce is happened
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II. CULTURAL:

The only identification that the tribal bear is the rich cultural heritages that they have preserved through ages inspite of several dis-advantages caused by non-tribals who usually go to such tribal pockets for economical exploitation. Though they have been economically exploited by the outsiders, yet they have not surrendered the cultural spirit. Because, really, they are the nature based culture-loving tribes.

In cultural field also the tribal women accept major task to ensure wound culture. As tribal communities mainly depend on agriculture and forest produces, the songs and dances are classified according to various seasons and different stages of farming crops. The tribal women are very hard working. They go to forest for collection of forest produces from down to dust. There are some specialised agricultural work in the field that the tribal women do better and for such heavy work during extreme summer or rain they are never found in panic or tiredness due to their close cultural ties with songs. In tribal dominating areas one can bear the melodious song of tribal women comming out of the thickly densing forest and hills. In the heavy summer of rain the working tribal women in the
field singing the traditional songs are the common sight. The songs are of ancient and nature based on the unwritten historical, mythological, geographical and social backgrounds. The tribal women have kept living these traditional songs from generations to generations due to their cultural affinity. Ceremonies and festivals are celebrated as per the growth of crops in the fields which have the reflection in tribal culture. During religious festivals the tribal women perform particular occasional songs and dances meant for them.

The role of tribal women in promoting cultural identity is equal with men. Her contribution is atleast recognised in cultural field and as such the tribal women enjoy equal status with man when there is a question of cultural bindings.

III. TRADITIONAL:

The tribal communities are tradition-oriented societies which the tribals have honoured with much care to protect it. The tribal women are the custodian to keep the traditional values of the society that is reflected in their culture also. The tribal culture and traditions have internal links to give the meaning more perfect in combination of the two. In certain traditional lines the role of tribal women is totally independent. It is a common sight in interior tribal villages. Where the traditional arts originated from the natural surroundings are painted and decorated by the tribal women. The traditional ornaments, dresses etc. once again introduce them as true lover of tradition. The well cleaned floor, area and the attractive wall painting
of tribal women is nothing but the tempo of obligation of the tribal women to their tradition. The tribal women have the credit in following the tradition of 'No Dowry' and have the sense of morality of self-dependent.

In the name of traditions of courage, there are some superstitions and bad social taboos that have caused concern for the tribal women. Otherwise, the status of the tribal women in the tradition bound society is well placed, because without their care some good traditions, might have vanished with introduction of modern living.

IV. ECONOMICAL:

The role of tribal women in the field of economy is very important and their society also recognise it with due consideration. The economical conditions of tribals are very pathetic through ages. So many factors are responsible for much financial sufferings of the tribals right from geographical locations that they live to acute illiteracy etc. So just to live on both man and women are to work hard in any condition with low wages or result. Nature has physically build them so strong that they are very hard working in any situations or environment.

Forest products collection and field agricultural work as labourer are the main basic source of income for tribal women. The tribal women never sit idle inside the home waiting for the male members income to take bread with the usual domestic works she
undertake extra hard work along with the man to prove her role in generating the family income. Her income is not considered as the suplementary one but is considered as the main earning members of the family and society. They play a vital and indispensable role in tribal economy contributing much more labour then men. To make their family economically healthy and to support it they take the help of various sources like kitchen garden, domestic affairs, piggery and poultry farm etc.

(a) KITCHEN GARDEN : As like the other societies, the cultivation of vegetables is also popular among the tribal community. They cultivate all kinds of vegetables which are found through out India. The tribal women living in interior area, no doubt, feel even today pride in having kitchen garden of their own. Elderly women spend most of her time in making a kitchen garden. They grow chilli, ginger, garlic, brinjal, potato, corriander, gaurd, lady's finger etc. The vegetables, to a great extent are the supplem ent of their requirement for domestic consumption and tastful food. It is also seen that most of the tribal women produced some vegetables in the garden and sold it in the market.

(b) PIGGERY AND POULTRY FARM : The tribal women as agriculturist, animal hasbandary plays an important role in their economy. They rear cow, buffalow, goat, elephant etc. Besides these, they also rear pig and poultry which they mostly need for meat, offering sacrifices and for trade too. The poultry and pig rearing is mainly confined to women folk. Every tribal woman has her own mini
piggery and poultry farm. Keeping such a farm is also their traditional occupation as well as economical sources.

The poultry and piggery and goat rearing are entirely managed by women folk in traditional way and most of these products are sold at home by themselves. Some times these products are also sold in the markets by the menfolk on behalf of the actual rearer. On the other hand, a tribal women earns lot of money by selling domestic animals. These earnings are her own money and she buys her necessary articles and save the rest for future purposes.

(c) WEAVING : Some of the tribal women are born weavers and they have a great heritage of traditional skills in weaving. They are the symbol of handloom weaving and art of spinning tool. Some tribal women have their own traditional pitloom.

The art of weaving is of unique interest and importance to the tribal women. There is no single women or young girl who is not expert in weaving among the tribal women. From early age, they start learning and by the time they attain puberty they become expert of weaving. From the very early times, they are used to weaving clothes to meet their requirement. Sometimes they sale these product in the market.

(d) EMPLOYMENT & LABOUR IN UNORGANISED SECTOR
Although the majority of the tribal educated women remain unemployed, among them a very few of them are the primary school
teachers M.E. and High School Teacher, mid-wifes, gramsevika, clerks, nurses etc. The university degree holders became professional teachers in middle and secondary schools, doctors, lawyers and other.

On the other hand, illiterate tribal women are mainly engaged as a labourer or worker in agriculture and allied areas. Some are worked in unorganised sector like brick, kiln, road constructions, stone cutting and construction. They also work locally in house hold industries, social and traditional forestry, sericulture etc.

(e) DOMESTIC AFFAIRS: Tribal women spend considerable time in collection of fuel, podder and water. They always spend their daily life as busy. So the tribal women do not have any leisure since leaving her bed early in the morning and till going to bed at night. Through out the whole day she has to keep herself busy in performing not only the indoor house-hold works but outdoor works also. She is required to cook food, wash clothes, spin yarn, weave cloth, attend to agricultural works in the fields and so on and so forth. Even a girl of school going age, therefore has to help her mother and other elderly women in the family not by taking care of her younger brother and sisters but also by helping the women of the family in the performance of day to day household works.

The popular slogan of 'Dine do" (live and let others to live) is best answered by the tribal women through hard work. So, the tribal women are found equally working with men though they get some-
thing less wages. In the local market tribal women sale the fores or agricultural products though they do not know how to count the money or coins.

To be more practical one can find the exterme old tribal women making mats, ropes of jutw grasses etc. Sitting on the xorner of the veranda. Therefore, in the financial front the tribal women' role cannot be overlooked for simple reason that the women are physically weak to undertake hard work. Somtimes, there is mis-manage ment of the scanty income and they (The tribal women) are deprived o share and justice in economical field though they'accept the major role to raise income int he family and society.

V. EDUCATIONAL :

In the field of education the tribal women have nothing to do with as they are too ignorant and do not under stand the fnris and prosperity of education. Even the tribal men of the society are also not so keen towards educational progress. Though there is very due and cry to popularise modern education it has failed to get suitable response from the trinal societyes.

Of late, some tribal women have come up in the field of education, but their number is so poor that the presence is not frit by the society. Again, it is very regretable that the tribal women, getting higher education crossing all these hurldes and bars of the society are loosing importance in their community rather to be a source of
inspiration because of the wrong conviction of the tribal society towards education.

VI. POLITICAL

Political status of tribal women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by them in the shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to this role. Indian constitution guarantees political equality through the institution of adult franchise and Article 15 which prohibits discrimination interalia on grounds of Sex. Though tribal women have actively participated in the political area of the country, give chance, but the number of these women can be counted in fingers. In this 20th century women's participation in political life was very low.

In the district of Kokrajhar the tribal women viz the Rabha and Boro are seen to be busy making their family economically strong and sound. Though various activities they subscribe to the family income. They are very hard working. They help their husbands in egrivulture through the seasons. They perform the plantation of paddy and various vegetables and earn money by selling them in the market. They also manage animal husbandry in the family. They also prepare "Jumai jaw" (wine) and "Emao" and enkur" (medicine for preparing wine) for family consumption and for use in various social and family rituals and for sale to support economic hardship. They are also excel in weaving. The articles of clothing for the women are generally produced. In the is own hand looms. The most remarkable
of the articles of clothing is the "Dokhna" (Boro) a saree like dress for the women. They regard it as their national symbol and it is compulsory for the women to wear it all occasions. They also produce various cloths for both men and women. They also engaged themselves in various small trades and commerce for living. They rear endi worms finding out threads from cocoons and weaving endi cloths and it is also a great pride to them to be on their self woven garments either in the house or outside.

With their prominent role the women have made great contribution to the enrichment of culture and gradual evolution of the society.