CHAPTER III

Housewives through the Historic Ages in India ;
Assam and It’s People

"If you don’t know history, you do not know
anything you’re a leaf that doesn’t know it’s
part of tree"

– Michale Crichton.

India has been a land of great paradox for its manifold varieties and diversities. This vast and variegated land has been covering in its fold ups and downs of many domestic, social, political, legal and economic events. Women of India also have been the centre of all events although the appropriate attitude of Indian males towards the female counterpart remain confusing till today. A review of India’s social history points out certain outstanding events and significant landmark in the awakening and emancipation of women. A brief portrayal of the status of women in India in different phases of history, thus helps to assess the overall status of Indian housewives because the women in general and housewives in particular everywhere has come from similar backdrops, that have been shaping up their destiny and identity in the society.

The study of Indian women and wives can be made under following heads:

Women in the Rig Vedic Age :

The Vedas, have been considered as the soul of all religions, that describe and analyse the activities and destinies of human life.’ Vedic thoughts are religious. According to the vedas, ‘religion in the education of moral ideals to organise and systematize the individual, family, collective and community life’.

1. Purushuttam Kabir, status education and problem of India women, p. 403, 1984
2. ibid p. 12
position with men during the vedic period. The girls as well as the boys were required to undergo "Upanayan"*. Education of women was looked upon as so important that the Arthravaya Veda asserted that: "the success of women in her married life depends upon her proper training during "brahmacharya"**. There were as many as twenty women who composed the hymns of the Rig Veda. Some of the renowned Vedic women were: Lopamudra, Viswavara, Sikata, Nivavari and Ghosha, One of the sutras of the Vedas required posterity to read everyday the names of great women like: Sulabha, Maitreya and Gargi, but unfortunately no record of their work remained in written form. Marriage was looked upon as a religious and social duty during that period and unmarried persons were not even allowed to perform vedic sacrifices. There were no limits of age for marriage and the unmarried women were called' Amayur*** The Vedic women were educated and had a voice in the selection of their husbands. Rig vedic references depicted the position of widows without any restrictions as was the case in the post Vedic period. Even remarriage of widows was allowed, Niyoga$ was also allowed to the housewives. Both the husbands and the wives were joint owners of the property Vedic women were the eternal examples of "Gyana-bhakti-and karma.$$ throughout the ages.

The Somhitas, Brahmanas and Upanishadic Ages:

In the ages of the Upanishads and the Samhitas, in the higher section of society, upanayana of the girls was common and they subsequently used to go through a course of education^6. Many of them used to attain distinctions in the

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3. Kuppuswary B, Social change in India, P. 78-79
* Religion rituals for upperclass-Brahmins.
** Training period under guru or teacher before marriage in the Vedic period.
*** unmarried women in vedic period.
$ Divorce
5. As Altekar, The position of women in Hindu civilization. P. 73. 74., 1962
$$ supreme sacred knowledge
6. Ibid P. 102
realm of theology and philosophy and a commendable number of women used to follow teaching as career. Well known in the Upanishadic period were the "great Brahmavadinis"* who were life long students of philosophy. In the "Bhrihadaka upanishad, one of the great challengers to the eminent sage "Yagnavalkya" was Gargi**. Notwithstanding that, one of the most celebrated Upanishadic passages was the conversation between Maitreyee and her husband Yagnavalkya. Maitreyee in the later stage acquired the divine wisdom while her husband decided to divide his property between his two wives before renouncing the world.

However, gradually religious and secular training started to be confined to the rich and upper class families only, and certain rights of the housewives pertaining to religion were curtailed. Sacrifices like "Rudrayagna" and Sitayagna needed housewives as the must performers. Recitations of Vedic prayers regularly were must for both the husbands and the wives. Syambaras*** in the khatriya circle was a must and even divorces and widows were permitted to get marry, tonsure of widows was not even a custom. Sati system and purdah did not prevail. Multifaceted women like nuns, dancing girls, courtesans, prostitutes were common in the society apart from the housewives who enjoyed their due place. courtesans were highly respected by the people. According to Vatsayana, the courtesans thoroughly trained by means of education. They also were well-versed in various artistic accomplishment, science of erotics, dialects, linguistics and the art of singing and dancing² Kosa, Upakosa, Padaliputta, Devadatta, were famous among them. Female ascetics or nuns were also kept in high pedestal. If they were assaulted, the offenders were subjected to punishment by the society. The glory of equality was prevalent in that period. Even if a nun got pregnant she

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* life long student of philosophy
** Scholar in philosophy of upanishada
7. Ibid P. 150.
*** Ceremony of selection of groom by choice by the girl in the ancient India
had to be the taken utmost care of and defended. Such was the golden phase of all sections of women and housewives during the Vedic and Upanishadic period. While almost all the housewives were educated in the society upheld a very high outlook and moral.

Thus before 300 B.C., this glorious position of women began degrade. Noted historian Altekar, pointed out the reasons for the degradation as follows:

- The discontinuation of Upanayanam, the neglect of education and lowering of the marriage age.
- The beginning of the Christian era.
- The Aryan invasion demanded more sons for war.
- Reaction against the Upanishadic, Buddhist and Jaina principles of asceticism, during which lots of women denounced married life.
- The Aryan insertion in the Non-Aryan areas and marriage with non-The Aryan women who were incapable of learning Sanskrit, and had little education.
- Idea of large kingdom, bright about purdah system.

Thus "neglect of the education of women has degraded the position of women and married wives and a dual standards of morality set up by Manu prevailed right up to 1950."^9

Parallel to the Smriti Age and the Vedic period, two epics, the 'Ramayana' and The 'Mahabharata' had tremendous influence on the people and the states of the women with varied dimensions still have lasting impact even on the future generations of housewives too.

^9 ibid P. 262
Ramayana, the ageless sacred epic composed by sage Valmiki carries the story of Lord Rama in Seven Kandas, which contain about 24000 verse. The morale and the principles depicted in the Ramayana has been the source of inspiration for those who aspire to lead a value based life. The golden age of the Vedic period was at its peak during Sri Ramas rule at Ayodha. Valmiki’s Ramayana has been considered a masterpiece in the realm of value based education\textsuperscript{10}. Various women characters in the Ramayana is the symbol of, strong morality. Women characters in the Ramayana bear the testimony to various customs which prevailed during that period. For example, Kaikyei, one among the three wives of king Dasaratha, initiated turmoil in Ayodhya by the demanding fourteen years exile of her step son Rama. This compulsion and customs to keep the promises given to the wives, is evident in many events in the Ramayana. The central character Sita and her orbit of life, various events in the course of Ramayana which shaped her testing, Sayambara, Agniparikha\textsuperscript{*} are the evident of esteem dignified position of women, and the wives, who had the freedom to choose their own partner, and had the liberty to shape up own destiny. On the other hand Ramas acceptance of the public gossiping and his decision to re-examine Sitas chastity, while she was pregnant, Indicate public hostality against women, and the existence of duality in the husbands and menfolk at the time of the epiage. On the other hand the compulsive presence of wives in religious offerings like Rajasuya Yajna, re-established the indispensability of the wives in all walks of life, Even religious slokas to worship Rama, requires mentioning of Sitas name before Rama\textsuperscript{11}

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10. H. H. Teyomayananda Swami, Gyana, Yagya, pg 199
* Testified by fire.
11. “आपादामण्डूर्तिबंधन दाताबंध सर्व सम्पदाम्।
लोकातिश्रमं स्रीवंशं भूषे, भूपेन मायाहम्।
बामां बामचद्रयं बामद्रायं वेधसे।
ब्रह्माद्भुरूय नायाय सीताकं पदंते नमः॥
नायव स्याहु बुधात दुःस्येः प्रदीयो
सत्तं कदापि च तदाश्विलान्तबामाः॥ Rama slokas in sanskrit.
The Mahabharata authored by Vyasa Deva' is the longest in volumes and one of the most illustrative stories ever told. In the Mahabharata we find quite a lot of liberal rules regarding women. Daughters were given full opportunity in religious education and training. Absence of child marriage and prevalence of widow marriage, were some of its striking features. Married women even then could remarry, for example. Damayanti, mother of two children, remarried according to her own choice, because her husband king Nala was absent for too long from her. The five sons of king Pandava, showed the then prevailing system of polyandry, Drupadi's vow to avenge her humiliation at the hands of Kaurava, Karna, who actually was Kunti's child born out of wedlock, and such similar episode, relating to the twist and turn of different character of the Mahabharata, also depict the glorious state of women and the housewives during the epic age. Even the Gita, containing the conversations between Shrikrishna and Arjuna had been the supreme celestial dialogue, where in also mention is found about women's position. Moreover Shri Krishna's address to Arjuna as the son of Kunti, depicts the recognition of guardianship of a mother, and thus women and the housewives in the epic period were accorded high status.

The Smiriti Age:

Women of India, who rose to the heights of knowledge and realisation, who vied with men in all spheres of life, and even surpassed them in many fields of life, who were entitled to the fullest freedom, as well as to the untrammelled self dependence and self-determination, suddenly found themselves confined to the four walls of the dark, desolate and depressing family lifes. Almost all their fundamental birthrights, rights to justice, freedom, education, were curtailed.

12. Slokas in sanskrit from the Gita

13. Slokas in sanskrit from the Gita

(Dear "Kunti Putra" never forsake your duty.
Although nothing is perfect.)
Study on women in India remain uncompleted if the Manu Smriti, the best known and one of the most honoured sacred verses is not taken in to account. It is not simply a law book but ranks as the expression of philosophy of life.*

Regarding women the manusmiti has some contradictory instructions, which still catch the attention of those, researching on the status of women: Some of the most important instructions of Manusmiriti are as follows:

> It is the duty of a husband and relations to dominate the wives.

> In childhood a female is subjected to father, in youth to husband and in old age to her son, she is never independent.

> To keep wives sane, she should be engaged in activities like caretaker of household expeditions, to serve her husband and guru's to keep busy in cooking, washing, clearing and keep her buy day and night.

> Drinking, confronting with husband without reason, mingling around aimlessly, taking nap are the faults of a woman.

Manu smrite depits few verses regarding the housewives as follows about the chactence of women in an extreme passive from like : inceptive of quality, age and beauty, women only want to have relation with man.

* According to "scholar Nitche"

** 9.2. অন্ততঃ ত্রিয়ঃ কার্যঃ কার্যঃ পুকুরেঃ বৈরিয়ানিশতঃ।
 বিষয়েথু চ সজ্জাঃ সাংস্পৃশ্যা আস্তান্তান্তা রুপে।।

9.3. পিতা কার্যক্ষেত্রে ভর্ত্তা কার্যক্ষেত্রে যৌনঃ।
 কার্যক্ষেত্রে স্বাভাবে পুকুর দীর্ঘ স্ত্রী সাজাতুমহিতা।।

9.11. অর্জনী সংগ্রহে চন্দ্রে বাঘে চের নিরোধেতে।
 শৃণুচে ধর্মেরপত্যাং পাকিনাস্যা রূপে।।

9.13. পাপার ভূঃপত্যাং পত্যাং চ বিবৃন্ধেচুনম।
 ব্রহ্মাণ্যভাগবতাং নরীসময়কালঃ ভূঃ।।

9.14. নিতঃ কার্যঃ বিবৃন্ধে নাসাং বৈশিষ্টাং সংহিতাঃ।
 স্বরূপঃ মা বিবৃন্ধয়া পুমানিতের ভূঃ।।
> Normally although well protected by nature, wives indulge in anti-husband activities characters, activities due to them unstable nature and loveless attitude.

> Menu created all evils initially for women like anger, lust, jealousy bad behaviour, couch.

> Women has no religious right to sacrifice, they can't even recite "Veda" Manu Smriti dictates about housewives as follows:

> Procreation, serving elders, lust full companionship, religion activities are the main activities of housewife.

> Wives who worship husbands and do not go against his wishes are called "Patibrata" and she goes to heaven after death.

> Manu depicts in details about how a children women or widow can have children but there is no such mention about widow marriage and such.

About the system of child marriage Manu Smriti direct.

> 30 year old groom will marry 12 year bride, 26yrs, will marry 8 year old girls, all total to protect Dharma, bride should be 3 times younger than the groom.

About the duties of housewives Manu Smriti reads like—

* 9.15. পৌঃসেল্লোচনচিহ্ন্তনে নি মেহদাং অরারভঃ
লক্ষ্মীবদন্তাত্ত্বিচ অরারভঃ বিকুর্বর্তে,

9.17. শ্যামনমলংকাবং কামং ক্রোধনার্জকম।
লোহস্তে কুর্ষোৎস স্ত্রীভো মনুকস্মপয়ঃ।।

9.18. নাধি স্ত্রীং ক্রিয়া মনেরিতি ধর্মার্থনিতি

9.27. উৎপাদনময়ত্যস্য জাত্স্য পরিমালনম।
প্রত্যহং লোকপ্রায়াং প্রত্যক্ষম মানুকিষ্ণম।।

9.26. প্রতিং যা নান্তিবিন মনোরণ্যায় সহস্রাৎ।
সা ভূত্তোকানগতি সপ্তঃ সাধীতি সেবচেতাত।।

* 9.26. প্রতিং যা নান্তিবিন মনোরণ্যায় সহস্রাৎ।
সা ভূত্তোকানগতি সপ্তঃ সাধীতি সেবচেতাত।

** বিশ্বার্থেহং কন্যাং হস্ত্যাং ধারণশ্চিকীয়।
নাধির যোধঃপত্য্যঃ রা ধৰ্ম্মে সীদতি সত্যন।।
> In childhood, in youth and in old state, housewife can't do anything without the wishes of relatives and in-laws:

> Even if the husband of a "Patibrata" is characterless, lustful, uneducated, unqualified, even then wives should worship him and should not deny him.

> Husband is the religion, husband is the supreme Dharma, to a housewife and will go to heaven after death.

> 5/157-158. 160. 161—depicts no marriage for window. Even it depicts that a widow should take only fruit and be vegetarian, never even look at another man and will have no feelings but contradictory-direction were, made by Manu smriti as it directs.

> If wife dies, husband can remarry.

> Despite controversies Monu smriti even uphold the status of Housewives— when few directions are contributory to the status of the housewives.

> When women are worshipped "Davatas reside peacefully.

> Girls who attain puberty will rather stay unmarried then married to a unqualified bad man—

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5/147. বালিয়া বা যুবকা বা মৃত্যু বাহিনী যোগিতা।
    ন স্ত্রীত্বের কর্তব্য। কিন্তু কার্যকর গুরুতর সত্ত্বা।
5/154. বিশিষ্টঃ কর্মমূলঃ গৃহেরা পবিত্রতা।
    উপচার ক্রিয়া সাধ্য সত্ত্বার দেবতাপতিঃ।
5/155. নাসি সৃষ্টি পুত্রের যজ্ঞে ন দত্ত নাগ্নপোষিতম।
    পতিত গৃহমন্ত্রে বেন তেন বৃত্তি মহীয়তে।
    ভার্তব নে পূর্বাকবিনী দ্বারাকীনামকামি।
    পুনর্দান্তর্ক্রিয়া কর্ষ্যত পুনর্বিন্দনে চ।।
    'যে যে নারকেষ্ঠ গৃহান্তে
    কমন্তে ত এ দেবতাং।
9/89. স্ত্রীকামমূল্যাৎ তিন্তে স্মৃত কর্মকার্যতাপি,
    ন চন্দ্রুকিং প্রয়স্তে তু গুণীনায় কর্মচিত্ত।।
    সহস্ত্র নিত্যমাতা পৌরুষের নাতিবচ্ছতে।
Manusmriti gives a description in details about the property right of a girl and thus glorified the position of the housewives as it mentioned that— one mother is glorious then 1000 father. There is no difference between a wife and the goddess of for takes. Depicts—The Spinsters get property from her brothers. Religious rites, without women are incomplete. Even wives in the lower castes, should be treated as jewels. A house is not a home. Without the housewives. A man is incomplete without wives and children.14

Thus the Manu Smriti has various dispensations that go against the freedom of women but on the other hand few rules upheld wives and women in general.

‘After manu it was Kautily, who has not only reviewed the role of the Indian, but also the women and the wives Kutilyas—writings can be summed up as follows :15

Rights to women for remarriage :

According to the principles of Kautilya, a woman could remarry under the following circumstances : Women whose husband have ventured into foreign land should wait for their return for at least one year and those who have male issue, should wait even further. Those whose husbands have arranged for their maintenance, should, should wait for at least two years. Those women whose husbands have not arranged for their maintenance, should be assisted by relatives for their maintenance for a period of four to eight years. Thereafter they should return the wealth received during marriage, to the women and bestow on her the right to remarry. Those Brahmin women who are without a male issue and whose husbands have gone abroad for studies, should wait for their husbands for ten years, while those with an issue should wait for twelve years. Wives of those husbands who have gone out on royal duties should wait for him whole life. If a

14. All selected verses are from Manusamhita, by Sharma Kiran p. 1 to 209
woman gives birth to an issue by a male of equal class while her husband is away on a foreign tour, then she should not be admonished. A woman who has to look for her livelihood owing to any calamity, announcement by which, relatives or other members of the family could remarry. Kautilya opined that a woman whose husband has expired or become a sage should not remarry very soon. Women who have children should wait for one year. Thereafter she could marry the real brother of her husband. In case, these are several real brothers, then the woman should select the one who is next to her husband in number who is alive, religious, able to maintain her or who has no wife. In case there is no real brother, then the woman should marry any clansman of her husband's clan and gotra.

**Maintenance of woman**

For maintenance of women the following rules should be observed: If the period of maintenance after divorce is not determined, there the husband should make the arrangements to provide her necessary expenses like that of food, clothing and other necessary expenses, depending on his income. When the period of maintenance is determined, and if the husband has not accepted dowry on wife's money at the time of marriage, then the husband should give her a fixed amount according to his income. If a woman lives with her mother or lives independently after reparation, then her husband cannot be compelled to provide for her maintenance. If a woman breaks marital rules there she should be taught gently and politely. But if not prepared to listen, then she should be punished physically. A woman who ill-treats her husband and engages in immoral acts should be given physical punishment.

Kautilya even mentioned that married women should be given the right of freedom of movement, specially at the time of death, sickness, distress or maternity of their family members

16. Ibid p. 43
Such are the importance given to the housewives, in almost all family matters. Koutily was thus, the first Indian saga, who've recognised the status of women and her place in the family as the equal partner of her husband.

**The Muslim Rule**

The invasion of the country by the Muslims brought about further deterioration in the position of Indian woman. Restrictions on her rights and freedom and the resultant hardships were aggravated. On one hand, the foreign Muslim conquerors attempted to impose their coercive norms on the conquered Hindu population; on the other hand, the Hindu society itself became more and more rigid curtailing thereby the rights and freedom of the lower castes of people and women. Due to this twofold reasons, this period came to be regarded as one of the darkest periods for the women in Indian history. The gradual deterioration of their status continued till the 19th century.17

Polygamy and the purdah were two of the most important social customs of the Muslim conquerors of India. Under the purdah system not only were the women required to live in a secluded apartment in the house, but also had to dress in an apparel which completely covered their body with the exception of the eyes. This particular custom prevented the from women from participating in public affairs.

However, a few women during that period made a mark by their own efforts. Rajia Sultana's accomplishments proved that the turkish rulers did not neglect the education of women. The Tajmahal, one of the seven wonders of the world still remains as an emblem of eternal love of Sahjahan for his wife Momtaz.

**The Colonial Rule**

Under the British rule in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the position of Indian women reached the lowest degree of deterioration.  

17. Dhawan S. K., Selected thoughts of India pp. 48 to 79, 1978
Ideologically women were considered to be the completely inferior people, without any significance or personality. Socially, she was kept in a state of utter subjection, devoid of any right. Women was suppressed and oppressed totally during that period.

The patriarchal joint family, the customs of polygamy and its concomitant circumstances the purdah, the property structure, early marriage, immolation of widows (Sati) and widowhood hindered the development of women.

Thus not only social institutions and customs thwarted the free growth of women's personality, but the prevailing ideology also assigned to the Indian woman an inferior status. She was denied independent status. In fact she had no individuality of her own. She had no separate status as a member of the family or the society. Her existence was taken for granted. In short, the prevailing position of a woman, whether Hindu or Muslim, was basically within the feudal system. She was denied the right to participate in social, political, or religious functions. She was given little education and relegated to permanent subjugation.

As a result the Indian woman in the wake of the British rule lost her independence, freedom and traits of independent personality.  

In order to eliminate the obstacles mentioned above, a fundamental change in the very social structure became necessary. A society based on new socioeconomics relations and a liberal democratic ideology was necessary for making women conscious of their rights as well as for realization of their role in the society.

The British conquest of India resulted in the emergence of an ideal environment and ideology. The British established the modern capitalist economic system and the modern state based on the principles of liberty and equality and generated a new climate for replacing the old, traditional, feudal, inegalitarian social structure and norms based on inequality. The British

18. Altekar As, the position of women in Hindu civilization p. 387, 1962
rulers enunciated new principles and adopted dual standards in India, the
conquered territory. They brought changes in the Indian society only to the extent
that suited their administration is India. A few social reformers of India including
Raja Rammohan Roy however took up the cudgel for the down trodden sections
of the society including women. As a result, by the time the constitution of India
was framed after the historic Indian freedom struggle, the recognition of juridical
equality of Indian women was a landmark in itself which brought her at par with
the woman of other developing and developed countries. Mention should be
made of Swami Vivekananda too.19

In pursuance of the principles laid down in the Constitution of India a
series of legislative enactment have been passed at central and state levels to
overcome a number of social disabilities particularly in the area of marriage and
property rights of women In fact, in India, the major efforts were improve made to
the status of women through legislations. It was in 1955 when the Hindu Marriage
Act was passed. The act abolished polygamy for the Hindus, allowed divorce to
either husband or wife on the same grounds and specified the marriage age for
girls at fifteen and for boys at eighteen, the same age as was in the Sarda Act
of 1929.

Secular and mixed marriages were legalised by the Special Marriage
act of 1954. These acts were followed by the Hindu Succession Act of 1956,
providing that son, daughter and widow-mother could inherit property equally. In
the cases of more than one wife, all widows together could inherit one share
each. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance act of 1956 provide separated
maintenance for a woman under certain conditions where legal separation or
divorce was not sought.

The Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in 1961 in an effort to end this
practice. Another major and more recent legislative effort to improve the position

19. Mumukshananda Swami, the message of Vivekananda, pp. 37, 38, 39, 1998
of women has been the passage of the State Maternity Benefit Act, and the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1972.

It is true that the Preamble to the Indian Constitution promises "equality of status and opportunity to all." However, no comprehensive programme of legislation was undertaken to translate the promise of equality into reality. However, it must be recognised that the introduction of the new value in the very fabric of the Indian society and the new juridic-economic framework, however, have distorted and limited the incentives of the Indians to launch movements for the reconstruction of the Indian society. The struggle for improvement of the status of women was also based on a few value systems which have recognized woman as an independent personality.

A galaxy of social reformers became the harbingers of change for women's position and right. The reformers of the nineteenth century addressed themselves to the position of women within the family. In the early twentieth century a few women became interested in similar problems but they began to emphasise new areas outside the family, such as education, welfare programmes and suffrage. They first attacked the social practice of child marriage and the harsh treatment of the widows. Sati system was another target of the reformers. Schools for women were founded in an effort to create the preconditions for improvement in the status of women. The Ramakrishna Mission' emphasized the female aspects of Hinduism and the Hindu revivalist movement accorded women a position of honour it also included social service and reforms affecting women among its objective. The Brahma Samaj in Bengal led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy opposed the Sati system and in 1820's the Governor-General 'William Bentinck' outlawed the practice. Sati had always been an exaggeration of the Hindu Ideal, which was seldom practised by the majority. Therefore, it could be successfully eradicated. The widow Remarriage Act of

1856 was less successful; it was easier to prevent the burning of the widow than to arrange her remarriage. The Hindu reformers also debated the matter of the age of marriage, or age of consent, which was raised to ten years and then raised to twelve years. The Sarda Act of 1929 raised the age still further to fifteen. Legal reform, however, was not always followed while observing the social customs.

Apart from the legal reform of the social customs, another force for the improvement in the status of women was education. The Hindu reformers who worked for the abolition of Sati and child marriage also favoured education for women. They gave encouragement by opening schools and colleges for women, though most of the early British schools were meant for boys only. It was not until the late 19th century that schools for girls were opened, followed by the establishment of a Women's University in Bombay by Mr. Karve. He also demonstrated his commitment to reform by marrying a widow. Among the first colleges for girls founded by the British were the medical colleges. Bombay was an early centre of education for widows, particularly, and women in general, as well as of social reform. Education for women was nevertheless restricted to a very small upper class elite.

A third force for change in the status of women was the movement for national independence. Women left seclusion of purdah to join the struggle for independence of India. The most potent agent for bringing women out of purdah and home was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who listed equality of women in his Nine-point programme. However, women's rights were not the primary goal of the national movement. Women gained political experience and confidence which extended their sphere of action beyond their families. Women and the national movement both benefited out of the active participation of women. It was a short step to create the Women's India Association in 1917, the All India Women's Conference in 1927 and to participate in the Indian National Congress founded in 1885. In 1917, an extraordinary Irish lady, Dr. Annie Besant, was
elected the first woman President of the Indian National Congress. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu became another president of that illustrious organisation.

**Post independent era**

Women, after independence of India, presents a different aspect. The Constitution of India, abolished inequality of women from the society. The Constitution proclaimed equal status for the women with men in all respects. The Preamble states:

The Hindu Code Bill, when passed Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru treated the occasion as the congress victory since it fulfilled his commitment to progress. The Hindu code Bill and the subsequent were as follows:

1. Hindu Marriage Act, 25 of 1955
2. Hindu Succession Act, 30 of 1956
3. Hindu Minority and guardianship Act, 32 of 1956

*We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India, into a sovereign socialist, secular, democratic, republic and to secure to all its citizens," Justice, social economic and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship. Equality of status and opportunity, and promote among them all; FRATERNITY, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation,

In our Constituent Assembly, this TWENTY-SIXTH DAY OF NOVEMBER 1949 do, HEREBY, ADOPT ENACT AND GIVE OURSELVES this Constitution.

Some of the important constitutional rights are:
1. Right to equality Article 14, 25, 15, 26, 16, 27
2. Right against exploitation article-23.
4. Fundamental duties (article 51A (e) 29.
5. Elections (Article 325)

See Agarwal R.C., constitutional development of India and National Movement., 1984
4. Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 78 of 1956

5. Dowry prohibition Act, 1961

6. Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1972

The Government Department of women and child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development has several aims like,

1. Social and economic empowerment of Women.

2. Training employment and education.

3. Attitudinal change towards the Girl child.

4. Support services.

5. Women's rights and the law.

6. General

After India's independence a large number of women and housewives have contributed substantially to the welfare of society as well as the nation*
Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in his speech on the occasion "Women's Empowerment Year 2001" said21,

"We have made tremendous progress in the political empowerment of women. However, a lot more remains to be done in terms of social and economic empowerment of women...I call upon everybody to join hands with the government in upholding the dignity and protecting the rights of the girl child and further enhancing their status"

* Indira Gandhi, Dr. Kiran Bedi, Medha Patekar, Arundhati Roy, Mother Teresa, Amrita Pritom and various women chief ministers of India, See Femina, January, 2000.

Indian women in the new millennium, presents a picture of development and challenges with increasing number of educated women, guarded with legal provisions and legislation. Indian women in all states, are taking new challenges against rampant increase of "crime against them outside and inside the households". Years back, is 1988. It was Rup Kanwar* a graduate, who despite educational background, could not save her from male atrocities.

References to India's civilisation that dates back to 5,000 years and more tells the story of people whose excellence and achievements were no less than that elsewhere in the world.

Yet-millennium women today are the women and the housewives, educated and balanced-- who with utmost care have taken up the challenges inside and outside the household boundaries.

The world has turned into a global village and efforts are made to recognise" the feminist philosophy as a humanist appeal. A close scrutiny on the history of Indian women and housewives depicts the powerful impact of religious education in enhancing the status of housewives during the vedic and upnishadic period, and on the other hand deterogatory state of women due to the lack of importance in education thus gives us a grim picture in the later period till the colonial rule. Assam, as a part and parcel of India, although, remained aloof before the colonially rule geographically, yet the history of various stages of women in Assam and few significant events give an important guidelines to are established belief that education have been a crucial tool in changing status of women and housewife in Kamrup and Assam.

**Brief historical review of Assam, its people, women and housewives :**

The name of Assam was not unknown to any parts of India. Casual reference to this region in Western accounts first appeared in the first century
A.D. Ptolemy’s geography. In ancient Indian writings Pragyotisha-Kamrupa were associated with Lauhitya, Kamrupa and Kamakhya. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have the references of Kamrupa as king Bhagadutta, son of king of Naraka of Pragyotisha fought in Kurukhetra battle. Hu-Yuan Chang, a Chinese traveller made a significant reference to different aspects of life in Kamrupa in his celebrated travelogue.

Before the advent of the Ahoms (in 1210 A.D.) the region lay divided into different kingdoms. The Kacharis dominated the central and south western territory; the Jayantias ruled mainly the Khasi and Jayantia hills; the Chutiyas over the northeast and tiny kingdoms (Nora, Moran, Muttok, Khamti, Singpho) that spread here and there. The Nagas had their own numerous chiefs reigning over small territories of their own hill areas. So were the Karbi and the Garos and other hill tribes limiting their habitation and rule in different tracts of their respective hill areas.

Six hundred year role of Ahoms:

Assam’s history, the history of its people, and the changes, taking place here, remain incomplete if the rule of the Ahoms, who ruled Assam from 1210 to 1826 for, 600 glorious years. The Ahom rulers initiated the writing of history for the first time in Assam Pratap Singha and Rudra Singha were the two Ahom rulers, who tried to expand their territory and initiate education. They patronised welfare measures for the women for the first time. After few events like, the Moamoria rebellion, and invasion of the Burmese it was East India company in 1826 AD. Came to Assam to rule. Contribution of Assamese people to the freedom of India against British rule was immense. It was Piyoli Phukon. Who was the first martyr of single for freedom followed by a group of educated leaders.

23. Chaliha Parag, Assam through the ages p. 57., 1997
24. Ibid p. 59
like Tarun Phukon, Gopinath Bordoloi, Sonkar Barua, whose hand in initiation of women education was indelible.

The Neo-Vaishnavite pan-Indian movement had its distinguished exponent in Assam in the great personage of Sri Sankardeva (1449-1568) who brought about reformation not only in the religious sphere but also moulded and gave new dimensions to all aspects of Assam’s culture, literature, arts, dance music as well as the social system. The great saint reformer brought about a happy and abiding synthesis of diverse cultural patterns of different people of the region removing all distinctions of caste and creed. Quite appropriately Sri Sankardeva has been acclaimed as the fountainhead of Assamese culture.25 who gave a place of honour and dignity to women in all his writings.

**Assamese literature and language**

In the field of literature, the earliest records show that the Assamese writings were mostly in the Buddhist philosophical tenets, known as Caryyas. Fully developed Assamese writings in verse date back to the 4th century when poets like Hem Saraswati, Harivara Vipra and Rudra Kandali translated portions of the Mahabharata26. To Madhav Kandali goes the unique honour of rendering the Ramayana into Assamese during this period under the patronage of the Borahi King Durlabha Narayana. Sankaradeva and his foremost disciple Madhava Deva, with a host of other followers built-up a very rich literary tradition composing thousands of verses original and translation, commentaries, and dramas in course of the 15th and 16th centuries. Although the Vaishnava fervour was the Assamese literature in all branches, it also rapidly developed with the lastest trends in both form and content. Translations to and from other Indian and foreign languages also took place, though not in a big way. The publication Board has done a good job in publishing rare books and translations besides aiding needy

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25 Sharma S. N., Vaishanavite moment and Satras of Assam p. 11, 12, 1982
26 Konwar Gunadhar, History of Assam p. 34, 1979
authors and rewarding eminent writers. The Assam Sahitya Sabha with a large popular base has undertaken laudable works in guiding the course of literature to progress and development.

The Assamese language belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of languages coming directly from the Purba Magadhi Prakrit. In the course of its development, the history of modern education in Assam began in 1826, when Assam became a part of the British Empire following the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo. Though the British, immediately after their arrival, took steps to set up educational institutions, it remained a halfhearted attempt till the early forties of the 19th century. It was only in 1841 that a vigorous drive was undertaken to set up schools for general education in different parts of the state. This effort led to the establishment of as many as 1293 educational institutions by the year 1875, with a total enrolment of 31,465 students. Needless to say, the Christian missionaries played a major role in this aspect. 27

Cotton college, the nerve-centre of higher education in the entire region, was established in 1901 in Guwahati following untiring efforts by Manik Chandra Barooah and others. Interestingly, a medical school came up at Dibrugarh a year earlier under the leadership of John Berry White, who incidentally was also the person to bring the railways to Assam.

Other institutions which had come up by that time included as many as three law colleges and a technical school. The then British administration, in order to boost the growth and development of education in the province, created the Department of Education in 1905, while it remained a fact that the real expansion of education took place only after India attained independence in 1947.

There were 7,574 primary schools, 742 middle schools, 191 high schools and seven colleges in Assam in 1947-48, while the Gauhati University, the first university of the entire region, came up only in 1948. By 1995-96, the State had five universities, 245 colleges, 67 junior colleges, 540 higher secondary schools, 3440 colleges, 67 junior colleges, 540 higher secondary schools,

3440 high schools, 7237 middle schools, 30,140 primary schools and 482 per-
primary schools, apart from an unspecified number of nursery and preparatory
schools all over the State.

While the five universities including the two Central universities set up
under the provisions of the Assam Accord, had a total enrolment of 6161 stu-
dents, the colleges and junior colleges put together had 3,28,988 students in
1995-96. The six medical education institutions, which include the three medical
colleges, one ayurvedic college and one homoeopathic college, apart from the
dental, pharmacy and nursing colleges had around 2300 students, while the three
engineering colleges had 3246 students.

While the Guwahati University was set up in 1948, the Dibrugarh Univer-
sity came into existence in 1965, the Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, in
1969, and the two Central universities—The Assam University, Silchar and the
Tezpur University came up in 1992. The same year also saw the opening of an
Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Guwahati which was under the provisions
of the Assam Accord of 1985.

The Assam Government has also set up one music college and a college
of art, both in Guwahati part from the three engineering colleges at Guwahati,
Jorhat and Silchar, there are eight polytechnic institutions in addition to 32 tech-
nical, industrial and arts and crafts schools in the State. Similarly there are 22
teachers' training colleges*.

source *

* Asoma, Govt. of Assam, 1990-2002.
## DISTRICT-WISE LITERACY RATES (MALE AND FEMALE) IN ASSAM

As per 2001 Census (P)

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Note: Literacy rate is the percentage of literates of the population aged 7 year and above.

Important events that shaped up the destiny of Assam are

1826: Assam was occupied by the Burmese, almost half of its population, was killed in the later part of the period.
1826: Assam came under the British rule.
1836: Bengali was made the official language of Assam. The Baptist Missionaries arrives in Assam.
1846: ORUNUDOI (The rising Sun) was published by Rev. Cutter, who gave the educated Assamese a new lease of life. The Bengali population of Assam started opposing the adoption of Assamese as an official language. The tribal belts and blocks felt being cheated.
1848: Rev. Brown published the first modern Assamese Grammar.
1872: Assamese was made the official language of Assam.
1937: Mahammad Saadulla became the Chief minister and since then people from East Bengal started to migrate to Assam.
1947: India became independent. The Naga Tribes also declared their independence.
1953: The Bengali population demanded the transfer of Goalpara District of Assam to West Bengal.
1960: Violence between the Assamese and the Bengalese people started.
1962: Border conflict between Indian and China.
1963: Nehru, the Prime Minister of India enacts of Infiltration of Pakistanis.
1972: The Guahati University adopted a resolution to adopt Assamese as a medium of instruction.
1974: AASU (All Assam Student Union) submitted 21 demands for the detection and deportation of illegal aliens.
1977: Golap Barbora forms the government in Assam.
1978: Student movement against Infiltrations started.
1979 : The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad was formed with a state wide demonstration against the infiltrations.
1979 : On 10 December Khargeswar Talukdar was killed by C.R.P.F.
1980 : 813 picketers died in Assam.
1985 : Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the Movement leaders signed the Assam Accord.
1985 : 12-18 October The Asom Gana Parishad was formed.
1985 : On 24th December Prafulla Mahanta became the chief Minister.
1985 : The ULFA came to the surface.

1991 to 2003 : Assam came under the spate of total unrest, and the problems of insurgency which resulted in growing number of crime and killings in Assam. Thus to get a true picture on the educated housewives, an overview of Assam and its people makes an indispensable part of study. Assam has a peculiar demographic set up, Although Assam did not experience any social evils like dowry, Devdasi and Sati system yet, the North-East region including Assam had been in a state of stagnation and backwardness. Although progress could not be thwarted yet overall picture had not been promised the state was ridden with numerous problems which were peculiar and complex. Paucity of financial resources, geographical seclusion, ravages caused by recurring floods and variegated population pattern, add to the problems.

From the glimpse of history of the housewives and the women in the ancient India, it had been evident that compared to other counterparts, India women were rather in privileged position, as they enjoyed fundamental rights like the right to vote, and the right to freedom. The housewives of the Vedic period, were much more organised and educated than the women of today. However with the advent of time the concept of education was transformed into the concept of progress and change. Similarly Assam as an indispensable part of India, and Kamrup as an important District of Assam since time immoral, had been a melting pot of diverse people and a colourful history.

Source *