CHAPTER II
Marriage Institution And The Position of Women.

1. Forms of Marriage:

The institution of marriage has greatly contributed towards the unity and structure of the Hindu Society. In a Hindu Society, a marriage is performed after receiving social and religious sanction; hence it has a two-fold binding upon the people, i.e., it must abide by the social rules and regulations and it should be in conformity to the rules as laid down in the Hindu scriptures. The Hindu Law-giver Manu mentions eight forms of marriage; they are (1) Brāhma, i.e., based upon Vedic rites; (2) Daiva, i.e., offering a girl to the priest; (3) Ārṣa, i.e., a marriage by purchase in which the bridegroom offers a pair of oxen to the bride's father; (4) Kāya or Prajāpatya, i.e., a form of marriage which is performed after the proposal being formally made by the would-be bridegroom; (5) Āsura, i.e., a marriage by purchase; (6) Gāndharva, i.e., a secret union; (7) Rākṣasa, i.e., a marriage by force or capture and (8) Pāisāca, i.e., a secret elopement.

According to Hindu law books, Brāhmaṇas are to follow the 'Brāhma,' 'Daiva,' 'Ārṣa,' and 'Prajāpatya' forms of marriage while Kṣatriyas are allowed to marry according to 'Rākṣasa,' 'Pāisāca' and 'Gāndharva' forms of marriage. The 'Āsura' form of marriage is valid for the 'Vaisyas.'

It is believed by the historians that nowhere in ancient India, the rules of the texts as regards the different forms of marriage were strictly followed. The evidences in Assam, as it was the land mostly occupied by the non-Aryan inhabitants, were very meagre to arrive at a definite conclusion. However, it can be assumed that among the Brāhmaṇas, Kayasthas, and Kalitas of Assam like other parts of India, the 'Brāhma' and the 'Prajāpatya' forms of marriages were common. Our predecessors in their works of the ancient
period find similarity of the 'Gandharva' form in the secret union of
Usā and Aniruddha, 'Rāksasa' form in the elopement of Rukmini by Kṛṣṇa
and another form called 'Svayamvara' in connection with the marriage of
Amritprabha with Meghabāhana, a prince of Kāśmir.

During the period of our discussion, though our records and sources
do not reveal sufficient evidence of the existence of all the forms of
marriages in Assam, yet on the basis of these records and sources, it can
safely be said that amongst the Brāhmanas and the Kāyasthas or Sāt-Sūdras,
the 'Brāhma' and the 'Prajāpatya' forms of marriages were prevalent in
Assam. According to Vedic rites, the Brāhmanas and the Kāyasthas, gave
their daughters in marriage, before they attained their puberty. From the
'Kathā-Guru-Charit', it is learnt that besides Brāhmanas, among some of
the Kāyasthas the early marriage system, i.e., giving daughters in marriage
before attaining puberty, was in vogue. After marriage, so long the girl
does not attain puberty, she remains in her father's house and when she
attains her puberty she is taken to her husband's house by performing
the second marriage. The Sūdras give their daughters in marriage after
the attainment of puberty. The widow marriage was prevalent among all
classes of Sūdras, with the exception that a Kāyastha widow, who was, in
the first time, given in marriage after the attainment of her puberty, was
not accepted by anybody for the second time. The brothers-in-law and other
guardians sometimes gave their deceased brother's widow in marriage to
others by recovering the expenses of the previous marriage from the new
groom. In such a case, the consent of the widow was also taken into account,
if she does not prefer to spoil her chastity, she may not accept such a
proposal of accepting a husband for the second time. In the 'Kathg-Guru-Charit' we find such a reference, wherein it is stated that after the death of Kamalalochan, son of Sankerdeva, an attempt was made by some wicked fellows to marry the wife of Kamalalochana to another person; but the widow refused to go to another groom for the second time. In a work, called 'Beulā-Lakhindār', it is stated that it is the custom of the Sudras that at the death of her husband, she can accept a second husband. In brief, we may conclude that widow marriage was prevalent among all classes of Sudras in this period, except Brāhmaṇas and a few high class Kayasthas.

The Kayasthas and the Kalitās bring their brides after performing marriage according to Vedic rites. But some of the Kalitās have brought their brides without performing marriage, owing to their poverty. The Sudras have, sometimes, taken their brides to their houses by giving necessary ornaments to the bride and feeding the members of the society without performing marriage according to Vedic rites. In such a case, sometime, the married women perform an auspicious function called 'Āg-chaul-diya' by for the good of the couple, by offering rice and Durvā grass on the heads of the couple. Such a pair is called 'Abiyai', i.e., unmarried. So long, such a couple does not perform their marriage ceremony according to Vedic rites, the bridge-groom is not allowed to perform the 'Sṛaddha' ceremonies of his father and mother, and without making any 'Prāyaschitta' (expiation), he is not allowed to perform any function relating to God. His kinsmen and family members do not take cooked food sitting on the same line nor he is allowed to distribute cooked food or to cook food for others. The son of such an unmarried couple, nevertheless, becomes the heir of his father's

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* Svāmi mare svāmi bhaje 'Sudra vyavahār /
--- Beula-Lakhindar, By- Narayandeva.
properties as usual. But if the couple becomes parents during their unmarried state, then they would be required to undergo 'Prayaschitta'. In case the husband of such a couple suddenly dies, before the performance of the marriage ceremony, then a purificatory function of the wife is made by giving her in marriage to the idol 'Salagrama' or to one of the holy works, such as Gitā, Bhāgavata or to a plantain tree. Again, if the husband dies without the celebration of the marriage according to Vedic rites, the woman, in order to purify herself, married a second time, a person of her community, according to Vedic rites, and then departs from him giving some ransom, instead of living husband and wife. A widow, whose marriage is not performed and kept by a Sudra, such as Keot, Koch etc. without performing marriage, is called 'Bātalu'. If she becomes bereft of husband for the second time and is taken as wife by a third husband, then she is called 'Dui-ghari Bātalu'. If she is taken by a fourth husband, then she is called 'Tin-ghari Bātalu'. But, such cases are seen among the people who have no social status. The 'Tin-ghari Bātalu' is considered so wretched that people even consider her sight very inauspicious at the commencement of a certain work. Sometimes, a bride of her own accord or a bridegroom of his own accord, respectively going to the bridegroom's or bride's house, live as husband and wife. In the first case the bride is called 'Chāpani' or 'Dhemni' and in the second case, the bridegroom is called 'Chāpani'. Again, sometimes, the father and the mother of a girl owing to the want of a son or a proper man to look after them at their old age as well as to look after their properties, keep a youngman of their community as bridegroom to their daughter; such a bridegroom is also called 'Chāpani'. The custom of taking money or other commodities by the parents
of the bride, from the bridegroom or bridegroom's party was prevalent among some of the Sudra communities till recently; the money is taken as a sort of price for the maintenance of the bride by the parents and is known as 'gā-dhan' (ga = body; dhan = money). This form can be identified with the 'Asura' form of marriage or marriage by purchase.7

'Darrang Rajvamsavali' states that the Koch King Biswa Singha married according to 'Gāndharva' form of marriage.8 But from the reign of his son king Naranarayana, marriage system according to Vedic rites, entered into the Hinduised Koch community. The Ahoms have been performing their marriage according to their own tribal system, known as 'Chaklong'. When the Ahom kings have made their marriage relationship with Hindu families, they have performed their marriage according to Hindu rites. Among the Ahoms, the custom of keeping the wife of the elder brother at his death, by the younger brother as his wife was prevalent, which is still continuing in their society. But the elder brother cannot keep the wife of the younger brother as his wife. Among the non-Aryan inhabitants like Mikir, Lāloong, Kachāri etc., marriage takes place with the consent of the bridegroom and the bride. The parents and the elders of the society simply endorse it. Amongst some of these tribes the habit of taking girls by force to make one's wife is also seen.9 During the Bihu festivals of Assam, we see a type of informal union, among some of the low class people, which resulted from their courtship. Such a union is generally approved by the society afterwards and a formal marriage ceremony according to the rites of the community is also celebrated. Among some of the non-Aryan people, such as

* Gāndharva vivāhe vihā karilā sāksāta //
Nrtya-gita vādyā-bhanda bajāi asangksāta //

----- Darrang Rajvamsavali-verse-1368.
Khāsi, Gāro and Mikir, the bridegroom goes to the house of the bride and lived there as his own house. Inter caste marriage between the different communities, except Brahmanas, was seen in Assam, though generally the society did not encourage it. If a man of the high class community or caste then the man degrades to the low community or caste of the girl. On the other hand, if a man of the low community or caste marries a girl of the high caste, then they are both considered as degraded and impure.

Amongst the eight forms, at least three forms of marriage can be identified with the forms of marriage prevalent in medieval Assam, viz., the 'Brahma', the 'Prajāpatya' and the 'Āsura'. The last mentioned one cannot be admitted as strictly adhering to the form mentioned by the Hindu scriptures. The other forms of marriage which have been discussed above, cannot be brought under a definite form of marriage mentioned in the Hindu scriptures. Most of them can be regarded as informal marriages, some of them having rather similarities with non-Aryan forms of marriage. For instance, the 'Chapaniā' form of marriage can be identified with the practice of marriage by 'Gā-khātī-dî', i.e., by service, prevalent among some of the non-Aryan tribes, particularly the Miris. The 'Chapaniā', that is, a bridegroom who lives in the house of the bride, reminds us of the marriage-form prevalent among the Khāsīs, where a bridegroom is required to go to the house of the bride to live. The Mohammedans and the Sikhs perform their marriages according to their own rites as prevalent in other parts of India.

Polygamy has been a general practice in our period, among the Kings, the nobles and the high officials. Durlabha Narayana, the king of Kamata,
had seven queens. The Ahom kings, each had at least two principal queens, known as 'Parbatia Kuari' and 'Raidangi Kuari' and many subordinate queens known as 'Chamua Kuari'. The nobles and ministers had married at least three wives. The Koch king Biswa Singha had forty eight queens and King Laksmi Narayana had as many as one hundred and twenty queens, as revealed by our sources. As said above, child marriage was prevalent among the Brāhmaṇas and some of the Kayasthas. Instances of becoming 'Sati', i.e., self-immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband is not totally absent. In the biographical literature of the Medieval period, it is found that at the death of Kusumbara, father of Sankardeva, his (Kusumbara's) wife Satya Sandhya became a 'Sati' at her husband's funeral pyre. Another instance is recorded in the 'Tripura' chronicle which stated that the queens of Ratnamanikya immolated themselves in the funeral pyre of their husband. The prevalence of the 'Sati' system is also known from the 'Yogini Tantra' where the system is prescribed for the Brāhmaṇa widows to burn themselves on the pyres of their husbands. The 'Yogini Tantra' allowed it for the widows of the Vaisyas and Sudras having deep love for their husbands and who were greatly moved by the sense of bereavement. It was prohibited for the women having many children and those who were unchaste. There were women who considered their chastity the most precious treasure and accordingly they tried to preserve it unharmed. From the biographical records, it is gathered that the widow of Kamalaloshana, who was extremely beautiful, finding it difficult to preserve her chastity from the contemporary Koch King (Raghudeva), disfigured her face by removing the teeth with a grinding stone. A woman, Radhika by name, wife of Purnagiri, a man of the fisherman community, rendered a miraculous service in the construction of a dam at
Tembuani stream, by force of her chastity by bringing water in a 'Palo' (a fishing instrument) having many big holes in it. When she poured the water of the 'Palo' brought from the stream, at the point where the construction work was going on, the current which had been baffling the work of riflet, immediately became mild and the people completed the construction of the dam. Another similar miraculous action done by the wife of an oilman is found in a chronicle, who had succeeded on the strength of her chastity in bringing water in a copper vessel, having thousand holes on its body, for worshipping a God at whose pleasure Chilarai, the brother of king Naranarayan, became cured of his white leprosy.

2. Position of Women:

All through the Medieval period, the Assamese women had been playing a prominent role in the household as well as in the social life of the Assamese people. The women folk have made significant contributions towards the family life, the social life and after all towards the economic life of the Assamese people.

In the Medieval period, the educational institutions were very few in number; therefore, not to speak of women, the percentage of literate male persons was very poor. Still then, instances of educated and learned women were not rare. It is evident from the 'Vrhat Rajvamsavali' that the ladies of the Bhuyan families were comparatively educated. One Pratap Bhuyan, a relative of Sankardeva, had a daughter named Bhānumati who was given in marriage to the Koch King Naranarayan. After the coronation of the King, Bhānumati became the chief queen and took the name Ratnamālā. It was by her order that the great sanskrit scholar Puruṣottam Bhattacharyya wrote the
Sanskrit grammar, called 'Prayog Ratnamālā'. With reference to Ratnamālā, N.N. Basu observes, "In those days the ladies of the royal harem were versed in Sanskrit. They even evinced great interest in the publication of religious books." Some of the women, during the period rose to such a height of learning and devotion that they succeeded in acquiring the headship of religious sect or institution. Amongst such women, mention may be made of learned Bhubaneswari, the daughter of Harideva, the founder preceptor of the Haridevi sect and Ai-śanaklātā, the grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva. Before his death, Harideva, the founder preceptor of the Haridevi sect, conferred the headship of his Satra da and 'Dharma-mālā' on his learned daughter Bhubaneswari. She was the first woman to become the head of such a religious institution in Assam and since then women began to exercise their influence in the domain of religion in Assam.

Chaoching, the queen of the Ahom king Suklengmung, alias Gargayān Rājā, who was hailing from the neighbouring Nārā country, was an accomplished scholar in the Ahom language and could write in Ahom language with the finger of her feet.

The Vaisnavite epoch was an era of mass education in Assam. A large number of women, in this period, became conversant in religious discourse, reading of religious books and recital of the names of God. All the queens of the King Lakṣmi-Narayana, numbering one hundred and twenty, became devout.

votaries of Vaisnavism. Above them, Dayāl, the wife of Teli-krisna Ātai
was appointed 'Medhi' who taught all of them the procedure of the recital
of God's name at different intervals of the day and the reading of the
holy books such as 'Ghoṣā', 'Kirttana', 'Bhāgavata' etc.. Dayāl was a
favourite disciple of Badulā Ātā, one of the prominent Vaisnavite preceptors
of the latter part of the Vaisnavite movement. The wife of Narayan Thakur,
popularly known as Thakur Ātā, the most favourite disciple of Sandardeva
and Madhavdeva, was a woman of great intelligence; she was a devout Vatsnava
with a great religious bent of mind. Many queens of this period patronized
literature and other branches of arts. One Bhubaneswar Bachaspati,
translated into Assamese verse the 'Bṛhannāradia Purāṇa' during the reign
of Suradarpā Narayana (A.D. 1708-1721), a Kashari king, within the juris­
diction of the modern Nwogong district, at the request of the queen
Chandrprabha, mother of Suradarpa Narayana and wife of king Tamraddhvaja.

By the permission of Siva Singha and his queen Ambika, Sukumar Barkath
wrote the famous work 'Hastividyārṇava' which is profusely illustrated by
two painters named Dilbar and Dosai. Further, a poet, named Ananta Acharyya,
at the instance of King Siva Singha and his queen Pramatheswari, alias
Phuleswari, rendered into Assamese verse the Sanskrit work entitled
'Saundaryya-Lahari' of the great Advaita Scholar Sankaracharyya and he
(Ananta Acharyya) named it 'Ananda-Lahari'. Another poet Vidyachandra
Kabisekhar rendered the 'Harivamsa' into Assamese verse at the behest of
Charu Singha (son of Rajeswar Singha) and his (Charu Singha's) wife
Premada. Thus, we see that many of the Ahom queens, during this Medieval
period, had been patronising the poets for the growth and development of
Assamese literature and encouraged other branches of culture in the State.
Chandari, the nurse of Sankardeva, was quite acquainted with the teachings of the 'Gita' and the art of painting and could also take part in theological discussions.

Some of the women in this period were very courageous and heroic and they could have performed many adventurous and heroic deeds with perfect accomplishment. Their valour and courage, sometimes made their opponents of the opposite sex dumb with awe and fear. As administrators on the throne, or as soldier in the battle-field, or as a patron of art and culture, or as a common subject, they had left remarkable records to their successors to be inspired with their ideals. Queen Phuleswari, queen Ambika and queen Sarbeswari ruled the kingdom of Assam successively, when their husband, king Siva Singha, in order to avoid the wrath of the stars, handed over the charge of the administration of the kingdom to them. During the reign of Shuhungmung, Mulagabharu, the wife of Fachengmung Bargohain, who died in the war with Turbak, mobilised a woman force and taking the leadership of it, fought a terrible fight against the army of Turbak. During the reign of Chaopha Shukham, alias Khora Raja, the Ahoms being unable to defeat the Koches, made a treaty with them, according to the terms of which the Ahom king agreed to send his son and the Bargohain Thaomunglung's son along with the sons of some other nobles to the Koch king to stay as hostages at his capital. When Thaomunglung's wife Chaochao Nangbu heard this, she made a fiery protest to her husband refusing to send her son to the Koch capital. She said: "I would not allow my son to be sent to Koch. Tell the king what he and the ministers are when they have yielded to the enemies. Why should he reign when he is unable to save his subjects from the enemies." She further said to her husband Thaomunglung,
“Let me have your head-dress, girdle, belt and sword. Though I am a female, I shall fight with the Koch king and let him know how a female can fight with a male.” Ignoring the protest of his wife Thaomunglung assured the king that he would send his son to the Koch king for the greater interest of the country. At this, Chaochao Nangbu exclaimed, “Who can give my son?” If the course of the Dikhau river can be diverted upwards to the hill by putting a dam across, then my son my be given.” The king gave up the idea of sending Thaomunglung’s son. In the same way, mention can be made of two wives of Nahar-khora, named Radha and Rukmini, who fought against the royal forces of the Ahom king in the revolution called ‘Moamaria Bidroh’. Even among the common-folk, women of upright character, courage and patriotism were not rare to find. At the time of Mirjumla’s invasion while king Jayaddhvaja Singh escaped to Naorup in upper Assam, a woman of the fisherman community who met him on the Dalauguri road, in a tone of repriminding the king said, “Oh, king, you have spent the last fifteen years of your reign in pleasure and luxury only; had you been conscious enough to give at least fifteen sods of soil where it was necessary, in these long fifteen years, why such a state of things should have befallen you. Now leaving us in such a state of affairs where do you want to go?”

Innumerable instances can be cited to prove that the women of Assam, of all status and position, were efficient in the art of spinning, weaving, embroidery and dyeing. Not to speak of common women, even the queens of the royal harem were interested in weaving. King Siva Singh’s consort, queen Sarbeswari herself taught young girls of different communities, batch by batch, the art of spinning, weaving and singing and dancing
within the royal harem under her own supervision. Francis Hamilton remarks, "The native women of all castes from queen downward, weave the four kinds of silk that are produced in the country, and with three-fourths of the people are clothed." So also the art of embroidery and dyeing were best known to the Assamese women, about which further discussion will be made in a subsequent chapter. Though there were no professional dyers in Assam, yet every woman, who was a weaver, could dye her cloth by an indigenous method. In the literary works and marriage songs, there are descriptions of cloth justifying the efficiency of the Assamese women in the art of spinning, weaving, embroidery and dyeing. In those days, the Assamese women had to supply their husband-warriors, before they proceeded to the battle-field, with a piece of cloth known as 'Kavach-kāpor' which they had to spin and weave within a night. They could spin out so fine and smooth threads that when they were woven into a piece of garment, the piece could be concealed within the grip of the fingers of the hand and could be dried without sun-shine. The 'Sāri' worn by Beula at the time of giving a dance performance in the assembly of the gods in heaven was beautifully embroidered with all the incarnating figures of Lord Krisna.

* Gā-dhui āidewe makak sudhile
Ai Rām ki-sāj salāba pāi (he) /
Chhāte sukūwā mūhite lukuwā
   Ai Rām sei sāj salāba pāi (he) //

----- Marriage Song -----

Ratnara mekhāla ṭāni bāndhīla kankāle /
Mūhite lukāi batāsata yanākumixh hāle // (Rukminiharan Kavya).

Devara basana tāka dekhite sundarah /
Kāporata lekhi āchhe āsā avatāra /
Matsya-rupa lekhi āchhe jale praveś kari /
Yena mate chāri veda uddhārilā Hari //..etc.

----- Beula-Lakhindar ----
Discussing about the efficiency of women in other allied arts, such as dancing, singing, painting etc., prior to our period, Dr. Choudhury observes: "It is likely that besides their household duties, some of them, particularly the queens had some sort of education and taste for other allied arts. The fine arts of the period portray female figures as playing on musical instruments and dancing...." In our period, in the art of dancing and singing, Assamese women had left ample evidence of their efficiency; but as regards their efficiency in the art of painting, specific references are so scanty that it is quite impossible to arrive at a definite conclusion about it. The tradition and the literary epics composed in the Medieval period, say that Chitralekha, a friend of Uṣā, daughter of king Banasura of Sonitpur (of the mythological period), was a painter of extra-ordinary merit who by portraying all the contemporary youths belonging to Jagṣa, Rakṣa, Gandharva, Kinnara, Deva and also of Manava, in pictures, found out Aniruddha, the Jadava-prince, whom Uṣā embraced in dream and deeply fell in love. In the Medieval period, under the patronage of the kings and queens and at the initiative of the Vaisnavite movement the art of painting had spread over Assam to a certain extent; but our sources are silent about the part directly played by women artists. In the biography of Sankardeva, it is found that Chandari, the nurse of Sankardeva, once, while the latter was painting the celestial Bāikuntha, pointed out to him the right place of placing the divine 'Kalpataru Brksa'. This leads us to believe that at least some of the women of the period had some sort of culture in the art of painting. Another illustrated work with pictures called 'Sankhachura-vadhā' was written by Kaviraj Chakravorty, the noted literateur of the Ahom period, at the instance of king Siva Singha and his queen Phuleswari.
Evidences of taking part in dancing and music by women, both in the early and in the Medieval period, are available. Gunabhiram Barua says that the kings have offered a pair of temple dancers along with singers and instrument players in the temples of Hajo, Dubi, Viswanath and Dergon. They had to dance to the tune of music accompanied by musical instruments, in front of the idol of the temples, three times a day at the times of worship and prayer. We have already mentioned about a class of people called 'Nāt' (Nāta) who were by profession expert dancers and musicians; specially the women of this class of people were very expert dancers. Queen Phuleswari, the consort of King Siva Singha, belonged to this 'Nāt' (Nāta) class. In the royal harem of the Ahom kings, there was a large number of women dancers. As said above, another consort of king Siva Singha, named Sarbeswari, taught a large number of young girls, the art of singing and dancing under her own supervision. During the Ahom rule, the girls dancers were engaged to work as spies also. Of the many causes, which made the Ahom monarch Pratap Singha furious to continue a war against the Moguls, one was that, Satrajita, an agent of the Moguls, kidnapped a temple dancer of Viswanath. Besides all these, there was in vogue a kind of dance called 'Deodhani-nṛtṛya' where an unmarried girl dances to the tune of some rough musical instruments like the drums and cymbals in the worship of goddess Manasa or in the festival of Ambabaci in the shrine of Kamakhya. Sculptures of the period bear female figures in postures of dancing or playing on musical instruments; these are still existing on the walls of the temples either in good or decayed condition. In the Bihu festivals, particularly in the 'Bahāg-Bihu', the dancing and singing of Bihu songs mellowed with erotic sentiment, by the teen aged tribal girls, along with instruments, in a lonely place, is a common spectacle, which is
however, declining in modern times. The literary records also corroborate that the women were expert singers and dancers. The ceremonial and some other religious functions are mostly accompanied by songs sung by women and functions, such as marriage, 'Ai-sabāh', 'Lakhimi-Sabāh' etc. are still continuing in our society in the same way. Assamese literature is rich with lullabys also and these cradle songs are mostly sung by women. The contribution of Assamese women to the ballad songs, particularly to the variety, called 'Kanyā-bāramāhi-git', is worth mentioning. From the biographical record, it is gathered that Chilarai, the brother of king Naranarayana who married Kamalapriya, the daughter of Ramrai, brother of Sankardeva, being deeply enthralled by the tune and inspired by the contents of a 'Bargit', composed by Sankardeva and sung by his wife (Kamalapriya) decided to be a disciple of Sankardeva. As a result of the Vaisnavite movement almost every woman acquired some sort of efficiency in the art of singing celestial songs called 'Bargit', 'Bhatimā', 'Totoi' etc. The songs sung in the marriage ceremony is an indispensable part of it which enhance the beauty and gravity of the ceremony. Besides, the leaders of the singing parties in the marriage ceremonies, when they attack and counter-attack each other through the medium of songs, are demanded by the situation to be skilled and efficient in composing the songs with proper rhyme and metre in the moment. Such women are, by nature, a bit poetic and music-minded. The marriage songs sung by attacking the persons related to the bride or the bridegroom are party Hallim is called 'Yorā-nām' in upper Assam and 'Khisā-git' in lower Assam. These 'Yorā-nāms' and other marriage

* Pancha māde yata  gāve sulalita
Kare Karatāla bāya /
Yena Apeśvari  mōche bhangi kari
Mayura pekhana dhariā //

---- Manasa Kavya----
songs are purely the contribution made by the women-folk. The humorous elements of these songs are also very significant.

In our period, it is found that the eunuchs, called 'Lehetiyā' in Assamese, were engaged to work as spies for collecting informations. The 'Lehetiyās', dressed like a maid servant were engaged to serve in the house of the person who was suspected of treason or conspiracy. Living there as maid servant for one or two years, until all the informations are gathered, the 'Lehetiyā' engaged in the spy-work, or 'Ripua', as it is called in Assamese, returns to his house and informs the agent all about his assignment. In the Intelligence Department of the Ahom kings, many attendant girls, known as 'Ligiri' living in the royal harem, were appointed to collect secret informations from the opposite party. Benudhar Sarma, the noted historian of the State, mentions many of the names of beautiful girls, such as Āghoni, Long-kali, Rongai, Suāgi, Sumitā etc., who rendered valuable services to the country by collecting secret informations from the enemies of the country.

In spite of their best contributions towards the family and social life, the women-folk were not given prominence in the society; they were always considered as subordinate to male persons and they had been confined to the household chores only. According to proverbial sayings still prevalent in the society, the women should not be believed in secret matters and the revelation of secret affairs to women is prohibited.* Besides, as evident from the discussion made above, as regards laws of inheritance, the women were debarred from any right to property. From the biographical works, it is gathered that though in general, household life was not discarded, yet the women were considered as impediment in the path of devotion and liberation.

* Tiri, Miri, Bhātau, Kowā /
Ei chārik āsai nopowā //

------ Assamese Proverb------
From certain references found in the most renowned work 'Kirttana' (chapter-Haramohana) of Sankardeva and in the biographical work 'Kathā-Guru-Charit', it is learnt that the Vaisnavas looked down upon the women-folk as evils who can illusion the mind of the wise and devoted persons; therefore, they advised the wise people to avoid the company of woman.\textsuperscript{46} Sankardeva himself refused to initiate women as they were liars, sinners, unchaste and too much attached to wealth and property.\textsuperscript{47} There were advocates of celibacy in the Vaisnava cult who compared the married life to that of a pig's life and the women as being doors to hell.\textsuperscript{48} In fact, there are certain Satras where celibacy is strictly observed by the heads of the Satras and the devotees living within the Satras. Such a Satra is called 'Udāsin Satra' and no woman is allowed to stay at night within the compound of such a Satra.

As to the system of taking veil, it is believed that in ancient Assam, the 'pardā' system was not in vogue. According to Dr. P. C. Choudhury, when and how the 'pardā' system was introduced in the Assamese society is not known. From the Tezpur grant, it is known that the women took their bath in the open place.\textsuperscript{49} The system of taking veil among the women of the tribal-folk, perhaps, was not a common practice. Even now, they do not attach importance to it; but among those, who entered into the Hindu-folk, the practice became popular. In the picture of queen Ambika, we do not see her taking a veil on her head. We think, the system came to be rigidly followed, among the married women of Assam, as a result of the Vaisnavite movement during the Medieval period. The Mohammedans who had to make their settlements in the state, in this period, had been partially responsible for introducing the system of taking veil amongst the women of Assam. The
prevalence of the system in the Medieval period is proved both by historical and biographical records. Gunabhiram Barua, in his 'Assam Buranjí', says that whenever a woman goes outside her house, after wearing the two pieces of garments the 'Mekhela' and the 'Rihan', she takes a third piece of cloth known as 'chádar' (scarf) either of the variety called 'Khania' or 'Cheleng' or of the 'Kárchim' variety. With this third piece, she covers her body keeping only her eyes, the nose and the feet uncovered.

The Vaisnavite movement seems to have laid more stress upon it. According to proverbial sayings, the exposition of limbs, such as face, breast etc. by a woman is considered to be a sign of an unchaste woman. Similar descriptions are found in connection with the description of unchaste and inauspicious women in the contemporary literary records. There are two episodes, one in the 'Katha-Guru-Charit' and the other in a Chronicle, in which the chastity of the wife of a fisherman and that of the wife of an oilman are involved. From these two episodes, it is clear that the exposure of certain parts of the body by a woman was considered a sinful action.

From the 'Katha-Guru-Charit', it is further learnt that one Harihár Ātā abandoned his wife for not obeying him in three points, one of which was that he ordered her not to show or keep certain parts of her body exposed; but one day on her way to a relative's house, while crossing a little stream, she drew her 'Mekhela' (the lower garment) up to the knee, in order to protect her garment from getting wet. This was one of the three reasons, for which Harihár Ātā decided to abandon her. All these lead us to believe that the Vaisnavite movement laid stress on the 'dardā' system in Assam and the habitation of the Mohammedans increased its popularity. According to W. Robinson, the women of Assam are beautiful to look at and they go about
in public without any artificial modesty like the women of other parts of India. In his own words: "The women in general form a striking contrast to the men; there is a great deal more of feminine beauty in them than is commonly met with in the women of Bengal, with a form and feature somewhat approaching the European. In most parts of the country the women of rank go about in public, quite divested of that artificial modesty, practised to such an extensive degree by native ladies of other parts of India."#53

In the literary records and proverbial sayings exhaustive descriptions are found about both the ominous and auspicious women. For example, a woman having the fore-teeth exposed out of the lips, the hairs of the head curled, having arched feet etc., are considered ominous. Among the four classes of women, viz., 'Hastini', 'Sankhini', 'Chitrini' and 'Padmini', described in the 'Kāmasutra', the 'Padmini' is considered the best and auspicious. Sankardeva, in his work 'Rukminiḥaraṇ kāvya', depicts Rukmini as belonging to the class of 'Padmini'. Besides, there are other conventional traits of the physique which are considered as auspicious or inauspicious and these are described in the literary works. Let us, for example, quote from the 'Rukminiḥaraṇ kāvya' where Sankardeva describes the physical beauty of Rukmini, the heroine of his work. Of course, it seems from the description that his Rukmini is a minor girl and not even in her teens.

"The splendour of her face glitters surpassing that of the moon. Her teeth of both the lines in the mouth are very thick, glittering like the two rows of pearls. (Sometimes the fine teeth are compared with the inner seeds of the pomegranate fruit.) The eyes are large and surpass the beauty of Lotus. Her eye-brows are bent like the bow of Madana, the God of love and her fore-head is flat and smooth
dazzling like a flat golden sheet. In comparison to her hair of the head, the tail of a yak lags far behind in beauty and her nose is so pointed that the *tinkwa* flower of a sesamum cannot stand equal to it. Her lips are as red as 'Banduli' flower and the ears can be compared with no other things of the world in beauty. Her voice is sweet like the voice of the Cuckoo and her neck is charming like a conch to look at. The arms of Rukmini are beautiful to look at resembling the white and soft part of the root of the lotus and her hands are reddish like the new foliage of the tree. The fingers of her hands resemble the bud of 'Champā' flower, proportionately round and thin, as if lathed. The crescent shaped white spot at the root of her nail is far more beautiful to look at than the reflection of the moon. She is a young girl (perhaps of the minor age) of the Padmini class, the best among the four, with her two growing breasts equal in size of jujube fruit. Her buttocks are wide and the waist is very small and thin, like the 'Dambaru' (drum) of the God Hara, which can be caught hold of within one's grip. Her thighs are well-shaped, as if lathed by a turner and are tender like the variety of the plantain tree known as 'Rānkal'. The two feet enthrall the minds of the spectators, resembling two lotuses in beauty. 54.

There are many other descriptions of beautiful women in other literary works of our period. But these are all conventional. There are descriptions of inauspicious women also. The inauspicious women, besides having inauspicious traits in the physique, are very luxurious and their character is also suspicious. They expose their limbs to others, talk with other persons, laugh loudly, etc. etc. which a chaste and auspicious woman does not. Such descriptions are mostly found in the proverbial sayings as well as in the literary works of the period.

As regards prevalence of prostitution in the Medieval period, references are very rare in our sources. The Assamese equivalent of the term prostitute is 'Vesya'; at least in the modern times, by the term 'Vesya', we mean a prostitute. But in the early times, the term 'Vesya' was perhaps not used in
such a hateful sense as we understand it to-day. In the Tezpur grant of Banamala the term 'Vesāya' is used to mean temple-dancers. According to Gunabhiram Barua, the system of prostitution was absent. It entered into Assam only after the Burmese invasion. Robinson's remark while referring to venereal diseases, that it "became common soon after the Burmese invasion and the name they gave it Maun Bipar" also confirms the assertion of Gunabhiram. In fine, it may be said that towards the later part of the Ahom rule, as a result of the Burmese invasion, as well as of the influx of soldiers from the western part of India, the system of prostitution came to be introduced in Assam.

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