CHAPTER III

WOMEN IN MYTHOLOGY AND LEGENDS OF ASSAM

3.1 Introduction:

Assam is a very ancient country with the names of Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa and Lauhatiya. The geographical background of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa was totally different from Assam of the present days. It represents a vast area. In fact the entire Northeast India, which now represents seven different states, stand for Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. The names Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa often occur in the great epics – the Ramayana and the Mhbab. The different Puranas both earlier and later refers to Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa. KP itself was composed in Assam in or about the tenth century A.D. The epics and the different Puranas refer to many female characters, in which some of them belong to the great land of Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa.

The history of this land before fourth century A.D. has not been properly accounted for. Whatever historical evidences were available, it was about royal harem because the royal harem was nearest to the sovereign and its influence upon the king was greatest. Therefore, a clear picture of the status and role of common women cannot be traced out from the available literary sources.
The mythological and *Pauranic* literature evaluates the royal women as princesses instrumental for matrimonial alliances, as Queen mothers influencing succession, and as regent queens. Assam is proud of their female characters that were not only familiar to the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley, the land of their birth and upbringing, but were treated as celebrities all over the country for their beauty and brightness, for good name, grace and luck.

3.2 Mother Goddesses:

If we turn to KP, we come across the few figures of Mother Goddesses who played a very important role in the formation of *Pragjyotisha* and *Kamarupa*.

3.2.1 The Mother Earth:

The first among the female characters mentioned in different literary sources was the Mother Goddess *Prithvi* or the Mother Earth who was conceived as the progenitor of Gods as of all living creatures. In the history of *Pragjyotisha* – *Kamarupa*, she was referred to as the mother of Narakasura\(^{206}\), the ancient ruler of *Pragjyotisha*. She played a dominant role in Naraka’s life in the person of nurse Katyayani. According to KP, *Bhumi* conceived Narakasura by Vishnu in his pig incarnation. That is why, Naraka is also known as *Bhauma*. He was left on the sacrificial ground of king Janaka of Videha, who brought him up in his court along with the royal princes. Goddess *Prithvi* impersonated herself as nurse Katyayani

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\(^{206}\) For an examination of Naraka’s episode, see Mankad: Narakasura episode in the KP, *JARS*, X, pp. 14-22.; Mishra: Historical notes on Narakasura and Bhagadatta, ibid, XI, pp. 3-11.
and looked to the child’s upbringing till he was sixteen years old. Naraka excelled the royal princess in valour and intelligence, which perturbed his foster parents lest he would some day usurp the throne. When Katyayani learnt about their suspicion, she took Naraka with her to the Ganges on pretext of pilgrimage and told him the story of his birth and helped him to meet his real father Vishnu. At the behest of Bhumi, Vishnu helped Naraka to achieve the kingdom of Pragjyotisha after subjugating the Kirata ruler Ghatakasura. After making him ruler, Bhumi prayed to Vishnu and secured a Vēisnavastra (a Vishnu weapon) for her son. Instead of this Vishnu ordained Naraka to co-operate with Dvija, i.e. twice born people (Aryans) and worship no other deities except the goddess Kamakhya.

After becoming the ruler of Pragjyotisha, Naraka married Maya, daughter of the king of Vidarbha. His real father while surrendering Pragjyotisha suggested Naraka to cooperate with twice born people (Aryans) and devote only the deity of Kamakhya. During his early period of reign, Naraka was self-righteous, devout and devoted to Goddess Kamakhya. But later on after coming under the evil persuasion of a neighbouring Daitya king named Banasura in Sonitpura (identified in Assamese tradition with Tezpur in Sonitpura district), Naraka turned out to be unspiritual and audacious and started breaching the advices of Vishnu by being unruly with twice born people and ceased to worship Goddess Kamakhya. He disregarded women by raping Tvashtri’s daughter Kaseru, abducting 16000 girls belonging to Nara, Deva and Gandhava including seven groups of Apsara, robbing of Aditi’s (Mother of Indra, Mitra and
He showed his audacity by asking Goddess Kamakhya to marry him. However, he was not successful in his impish mission due to diplomacy of Goddess Kamakhya. She agreed to Naraka’s proposal on condition of erecting a temple and tank for her on Nilachal Mountain and constructing a road to the temple in a single night. When he was going to be almost successful in his task, Goddess Kamakhya cunningly made a cock to crew before dawn, proving that the allotted time was finished before the completion of the work and henceforth she refused to marry Naraka. Naraka was very annoyed on the deceitful work of Goddess. On rage, he slew the cock and the place thenceforth known as Kukurekata. Naraka was so irritated that he clogged people to go to the temple and worship Goddess Kamakhya. In this process he stopped Sage Vasistha to visit to the temple of the Goddess. As a consequence of this, the enraged sage cursed both Naraka and Goddess Kamakhya saying that nobody’s desire would be fulfilled by worshipping at the shrine of the Goddess and the latter with all her attendants would disappear till Naraka was alive. The sage also cursed Naraka that he would be killed by his real father Vishnu. This curse came to be true when Naraka was slain by Vishnu in person of Lord Krishna by defeating Asura Muru and his sons.

In the beginning of his reign, when Naraka ruled the country nicely and well behaved with the Aryans and was faithful towards Goddess Kamakhya, he got the full support of his parents Vishnu and Bhumi as

207. Harivamsa, Chapter 63-64
well as Goddess Kamakhya. But in the later part of his reign, when Naraka's attitude changed towards his people and the Goddess and he became unscrupulous and started doing wrong things, then not only Vishnu and Goddess Kamakhya but also his mother Bhumi went against her. It is also very important to note that mother Bhumi in order to save the innocent people from the torment of Naraka, prayed to Vishnu to obliterate her son Naraka. The above incident proved that women in earlier times not only played a significant role in politics and society but also never supported the evil practices of anybody if it was her own son also.

3.2.2 Goddess Kamakhya:

The most powerful and dominating woman of Pragiyotisha-Kamarupa was Goddess Kamakhya. About her influence, Dr. Kakati writes, "It was under her banner that the first empire in early Assam was built. It was over her emergence and recognition as the presiding deity of the state that the Saivites and the Vaisnavites went into silent conflict and Naraka, the first builder of the state lost his life". In the KP, Goddess Kamakhya had been given the super importance among the deities of Pragiyotisha-Kamarupa. Even the name Kamarupa had been associated with the name of the Goddess Kamakhya. It is said that when Naraka was installed by Vishnu as the king of Pragiyotisha and the custodian of Goddess Kamakhya, the name of the land was changed from Pragiyotisha to Kamarupa. Dr. Kakati also supports this and said that the term Kamarupa (Kamakhya) symbolized a new cult, which was probably derived

208. B. Kakati, Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 33.
209. KP, chap. 38.95, 96.
from some pre-Aryan cult and in exaltation of it the land itself was rechristened. The term Kamru as an alternative form of Kamarupa is found in the Hara–Gauri samvada. Thus Kamarupa = the hill of Kamru = a Goddess. Therefore, we find that the Goddess Kamakhya played a dominant role in the history of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa

3.3 Matrimonial alliances with Princesses of Kamarupa:

If we turn to the epics, we come to know that in this period the valiant princes from the powerful kingdoms of Aryabratta were very eager to seek the hand of the daughters of this land.

3.3.1 Maya:

Maya was the princess of Vidarbha kingdom, which is said to be located in the region around Sadiya. This kingdom is also said to be the birth land of Rukmini, wife of Krishna and Damayanti, wife of Nala, which will be discussed later on. After being the king of Pragjyotisha, Naraka married Maya, the princess of Vidarbha. Maya belonged to the Sanskrit speaking or Deva community. Though any important evidence regarding the role of Maya had not been found in any sources, but it seems that Vidarbha was a powerful kingdom at that time. We find that in the later times also, many princes from the powerful kingdom of Aryabratta like Krishna of Mathura kingdom and Nala of Nishada kingdom also established marital relationship with the princesses.

211. B. Kakati, op. cit., p. 6.
212. See Guit, A History of Assam, pp. 15, 42.
213. Dr. B. Chakravarti, A cultural History of North-East India, p. 17.
of Vidarbha. Therefore, it seems that when Naraka established himself in *Pragjyotisha*, he might have sought to achieve some political supremacy to strengthen and expand his kingdom. This might be the reason for which he was so interested to establish the strong relationship with the powerful kingdom of Vidarbha by marrying the princess Maya.

3.3.2 Bhanumati:

In this regard the first name we can mention is Bhanumati, the daughter of king Bhagadatta, who was married to Duryodhana, the eldest among the *Kauravas*. It is believed that an old tank namely Dighali tank in the heart of present Guwahati city was excavated on the occasion of the marriage between Duryodhana and Bhanumati. Bhagadatta arranged a *swayambara sabha* for princess Bhanumati in Kamarupa. Many Yuvarajas, princes and dignitaries of different kingdoms came to attend the *swayambara*. It was decided that the person, who would be able to hit a target of an eye of the fish with an arrow by seeing the shadow of the fish in the water, hanged on a fishing hook which was fitted near the platform erected over the water. This hard task was succeeded by an expert in archery namely Karna, son of a charioteer on behalf of his friend Duryodhana. The *swayambara sabha* and the archery contest indicated that princess Bhanumati was a beautiful lady possessing many accomplishments. That is why Bhagadatta might have arranged an archery contest to get a suitable match for his daughter. Marriage with prince Duryodhana in spite of Karna, who actually won the contest clearly points out that the

princess of *kamarupa* was equal to the status of the powerful *Kauravas* of Hastinapur, the most powerful kingdom of *Aryabhatta*.

### 3.3.3 Rukmini:

Rukmini was another princess of Assam who was married to Krishna of Mathura kingdom. Rukmini was the daughter of king Bhismak of Vidarbha. His capital was called Kundina, situated on the bank of the river Kundil, which flew through Sadiya. The ruins of Bhismak Nagar can still be found in the place called Roing in the border of Arunachal Pradesh. The story of Bhismak and his daughter Rukmini is narrated in many of the mythological books. King Bhismak and queen Sashiprabha had five sons and one beautiful daughter Rukmini. Rukmini was so beautiful that Krishna having heard of her beauty fell in love with the latter and solicited her in marriage. In spite of her affiance to another prince named Sisupala of Magadha kingdom, Krishna, on the wedding day, before the betrothal ceremony could take place, carried Rukmini in his chariot to Dwarka, defeating the crowd of princes present in the wedding. This incident is very strange as well as significant that Krishna, who is found to be a dominant character in Hindu mythology, came such a long way to a distant place like Sadiya for the daughter of Bhismak. It is important to notice that not only Krishna, but also Sisupal of Magadh kingdom, which was one of the powerful kingdoms of sixteen *Mahajanapadas*, was also assenting to marry Rukmini. It proved that establishing the marital relationship with *Kamarupa* was no doubt a symbol of proud and status

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for different kingdoms of *Aryabrattra*.

3.3.4 Ushia:

Like Rukmini, we get the instance of princess Usha in the mythological books. She was the daughter of a king called Banasura of Sonitpur (modern Tezpur)\(^{217}\). Usha was married to Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna. It is said that Usha was such an unsurpassed in beauty that her father in order to protect her from evil glances, concealed her in a castle. Some ancient relics of a building in the Agnigarh hill is said to be that castle\(^{218}\). In spite of this concealment, Usha fell in love with Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna. Aniruddha, however, managed to enter into the castle with the help of Usha's friend Chitralekha and married Usha according to *Gandharva* ceremony. But he was seen and seized by Banasura, but was rescued by Krishna who defeated Bana in a great battle which is said to be fought in the modern site of the Tezpur bil.

3.3.5 Damayanti:

Historical famous Damayanti's motherland was Assam. She was the daughter of king Bheema of Vidarbha (presently located in the Sadiya region)\(^{219}\). Damayanti was married to Nala, king of Nishada kingdom. It is said that Damayanti's beauty was incomparable as neither among celestials, nor among *yakshas*, nor among men there was anyone who possessed such beauty. Nala fell in love with Damayanti after hearing


\(^{218}\) S.L. Baruah, A Comprehensive History of Assam, p. 86.

\(^{219}\) *Mhb*, *Vana-Parva (Nalopakhyana Parva)*; Nala-Damayanti's story is also translated in dramatical form in Assamese in Sri Ananda Chandra Barua, Nala-Damayanti
of her transcendent beauty. Damayanti, on the other hand, having heard
of Nala’s accomplishments, enamoured with him. It is said that king
Bheema arranged a swayambara sabha for his daughter and in this
swayambara sabha, not only the princes of different kingdoms but many
Devas also participated. It indicated that the kings and princes of entire
Aryabratra were desirous of getting Damayanti as their spouse.

3.3.6 Hidimba:

Hidimba, a kachari princess, married Bhima, the second
among the Pandavas of Mhb\textsuperscript{220}. The southern branch of the kacharis claims
their descent from Ghatotkacha\textsuperscript{221}, the son of Bhima and Hidimba.
Ghatotkacha was the person, who sacrificed his life fighting in support
of the Pandavas in the war of Kurukshetra\textsuperscript{222}. Modern Dimapur is said
to be the capital city of Ghatotkacha. The place was formerly known as
Hidimbapur as it was established by Hidimb, the brother of Ghatotkacha’s
mother and Bhima’s wife Hidimba\textsuperscript{223}.

3.3.7 Ulupi and Chitrangada:

Ulupi and Chitrangada, the two principal characters of Mhb,
were married to Arjuna, the third Pandava of Mhb\textsuperscript{224}. Ulupi was the
daughter of Kauravya, the Naga king born in the line of Airavata.
Chitrangada was the daughter of Chitravahana, king of Manipur. Many

\textsuperscript{220} Mhb, Adi-Parva.
\textsuperscript{221} E.A. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 240.
\textsuperscript{222} Mhb, Adi-Parva.
43-44, 97-98.
\textsuperscript{224} Mahabharata, Adi Parva (Arjuna-Vanavasa Parva and Ashwamedha Parva)
historians tried to prove that the Naga kingdom and kingdom of Manipur were modern Nagaland and Manipur respectively, which were situated side by side. These marital alliances were important in many ways. In the opinion of S.S. Ahmed, Arjuna's matrimonial relationship with these two countries proved that at that time Manipur and Naga realm were occupied by civilized people otherwise Arjuna's matrimonial relationship with these two countries would have been quite impossible. Arjuna, who was born of a respectable family, could not have married daughters of uncivilized kings. These marital relationship also proved that Ulupi and Chitrangada were not only beautiful but also possessed some exceptional qualities, otherwise Arjuna, whose bravery was accepted and recognized by most of the kings of Aryabhatta could not have married the ordinary princesses.

The matrimonial alliances stated above proved that princesses of this land enjoyed a status equal to the princes of the different powerful kingdoms in point of family, beauty and quality. It is important to note that Swayambara was the very popular mode to select the life partner. It also proves that women were allowed freedom to select their own life partner.

3.4 Position of women in society:

The position occupied by women in the mythological period is very difficult to judge because we have to depend only on the literary sources such as the great epics – Ramayana and the Mhb and the Puranas.

225. S.S. Ahmed, op. cit, pp. 66-69; Dr. Wade, An account of Assam, p 37; E.A. Gait, op. cit. p. 16.
But the stories depicted in these sources are very confusing and contradictory. Moreover the stories revolve around the royal families and the instances and persons concerned with the royal families. Therefore, we do not get any distinct vision of the society of the common man and woman. But the stories depicted about the leading women of the mythological period throws an interesting side-light on the position occupied by the royal women of Assamese society in the mythological period.

Women were respected and honoured in the household as well as society. The great epic *Mbh* considered women as centers of household life as well as pivots of entire society because the future of the country in the form of children are born and nourished by them. That is why women should be adored and seen as symbol of *Devi* by the society\(^{227}\). The evil custom of child marriage was not in vogue in that period. It is clear from the story of Bhanumati, Rukmini, Usa, Damayanti, Ulupi and Chitrangada. They married according to their own choice. Though the marriages of Bhanumati, Damayanti, Ulupi and Chitrangada were held with the consent of their fathers but Rukmini and Usa had to face some of the opposition from their parents. The chastity and devotion were considered as the ornaments of women and they were portrayed in the mythological books as chaste and devoted wife.\(^{3}\)

**3.4.1 Portray of Women as Ideal Wife:**

The mythological literature gives us the picture of ideal women, who have been extolled as paragons of virtue. The greatest example

\(^{227}\) Indra, The status of women in ancient India, pp. 3-6.
of chaste and devoted wife was Sita – the consort of Rama. About her chastity, the God of fire himself assured Rama that the great lady was protected by her own inner fire and that Ravana could not overcome her, just as the ocean could not exceed its limits\textsuperscript{228}. Women such as Damayanti, Behula etc., belonging to the Assamese society were portrayed as dutiful, truthful, chaste, self-sacrificing, devoted towards their husbands. They could not be deviated from their path, even when the temptations came in front of them in the crisis situation. The legends associated with them consistently refer to their purity and selfless attachment to their consorts. They regarded their husband as Gods.

Behula, the daughter of merchant Shahei of Ujaninagar\textsuperscript{229}, was married to Lakhinder, the son of merchant Chandradhar of Champaknagar\textsuperscript{230}. Chandradhar was not in consent to the worshipping of Manasadevi, the snake queen, and in retaliation, Manasadevi killed Lakhinder and his seven brothers. But Behula restored life to her dead husband by suffering endless prosecution and miseries\textsuperscript{231}.

Damayanti’s husband Nala was exiled by his brother Pushkara after the latter defeated Nala in the game of dice. Damayanti, as a faithful and chaste wife, followed her husband and faced unlimited calamities and distraught after Nala’s disappearance from the deep forest. The lots of temptation came before her but she maintained her chastity and finally

\textsuperscript{228} Ramayana, 1–73.
\textsuperscript{229} Local tradition recognize present Ambagaon in Mangaldoi District as Ujani Nagar. For details vide Dineswar Sarma, Mangaldoir Buranji, p. 20–31.
\textsuperscript{230} The present Chaygaon in Kamrup District is recognized a Champaknagar and the ruins of the palace of Behula and Lakhinder is still seen in Chaygaon.
\textsuperscript{231} Manasa-Kavya
she could get a trace of her husband with her great intelligence\textsuperscript{232}. But faithfulness was regarded only on the part of women and men were allowed to marry more than once.

3.5 Polygamy:

Polygamy was a very common feature of the social organization in those days, specially the men belonging to the royal families. Ramayana mentions about King Dasratha of Ayodhya, who had four wives. Mbh also mentions about few cases of polygamy. King Pandu had two wives namely Kunti and Madri. Arjuna, the hero of Mbh, married Draupadi, Subhadra, Ulupi, Chitrangada and Uttara one after the other, but he was never denied the high status, which he occupied throughout, on account of that. On the other hand, he had with him, the sincerest benedictions of both the great personages of the time, Bhisma and Shri Krishna. The latter had eight prime consorts. Bheema, another Pandav prince had two more wives besides Draupadi – one was the sister of Sisupala and another named as Hidimba, a Kachari Princess of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. Duryodhana is mentioned to have left a harem of women behind his death. Similarly, Narakasura, kept 16000 women in his harem belonging to Nara, Deva and Gandhava including seven groups of Apsaras\textsuperscript{233}. All the cases prove that the practice of polygamy had been very widely prevalent in the Mbh and it carried with it no sense of disapproval. It was first adopted by the royal families only, as a measure of satisfying the sense of their false pride.

\textsuperscript{232} Mhb, Vana-Parva (Nalopakhyana-Parva).
\textsuperscript{233} Harivamsa, chapter 63-64.
and supposed superiority. Later on, even the general people adopted it.  

3.6 Adultery:  

Adultery was prevalent in mythological periods. The Mbh narrates the story of Sri Krishna, who was engaged with so many girls known as Gopis. The birth of the five Pandavas was result of the union between their mothers with different persons. In the history of Kamarupa, we find the adultery case of Arimatta’s mother. It is said that his mother was raped by Brahmaputra and consequently Arimatta was born. Later on Arimatta unwittingly killed his foster father and for the sin of patricide, he committed suicide.

Arimatta’s wife Ratnamala was also engaged in adultery and was disloyal to her husband by treacherously killing him. Ratnamala was engaged in an intrigue with a king named Phengua belonging to the house of Kamatpur and revealed the secrecy of spoiling the bowstrings of Arimatta’s soldiers by rubbing alkali on the strings due to which Arimatta was defeated and killed by Phengua. But Ratnamala also had to pay a heavy cost for her unfaithfulness. King Phengua defeated and killed Arimatta and captured his kingdom. He also put Ratnamala to death, saying that, as she had cheated her husband, she would probably also ditch him, if he were to fulfill his promise and marry her.

Arimatta’s son Ratnasingh was also engaged in an intrigue with the wife of a Brahmin and it is said that due to the curse of the Brahmin, Ratnasingh lost his kingdom.

236. Kamarupar Buranji, pp. 3-4.
3.7 Contribution of Women in art and culture:

Women of Pragjyotisha – Kamarupa, not only had proposing beauty but also gave their valuable contribution in the field of music, dancing, painting, weaving and embroidery etc. Regarding their efficiency in the art of painting, we can mention the name of Chitralekha. She was a friend of Usha. She was the daughter of Kubhandu, a minister in the court of Banasura. Chitralekha was an expert delineator and also a magician. She, by portraying the picture of all the contemporary youths belonging to Jaksa, Raksas, Gandharva, Kinnara, Deva and also Manava, found out Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna, by the description given by Usha, whom the latter enamoured in her dreams. It is said that Chitralekha exercised her magic power to bring Aniruddha from Dwarka to Sonitpur, where Aniruddha and Usha were united with each other\textsuperscript{237}.

Assamese women were found to be expert weavers by birth, the details of which will be discussed in the relevant chapter. This quality might have come as a tradition from the mythological period. Assamese women were found to be equally efficient in embroidery works also. During a dance performance in the assembly of the Gods in heaven, Behula, the wife of Lakhinder wore a sari beautifully embroidered with all the incarnating figures of Lord Krishna\textsuperscript{238}.

Women contributed in the field of music and dancing. Behula performed a beautiful dance in the assembly of Gods in heaven to please them, so that they would force Manasa Goddesses to return back the life

\textsuperscript{237} The story of Chitralekha is mentioned along with the story of Usha.
\textsuperscript{238} Sankardeva, \textit{Rukmini-Harana}, v. 55; \textit{Beula Lakhmedar}, p. 85; KGC, pp. 210, 211, 213.
of her husband who became lifeless due to snake biting\textsuperscript{239}.

3.8 Women as good cooks:

Women in mythological period were very good cooks also and made variety of delicious dishes. One of the examples of the art of cooking of Chitrelekhya is mentioned in \textit{Kumara-Harana}. "After performing the works of the marriage ceremony, Chitrelekhya made arrangements for food. Whatever Chitrelekhya cooked, she cooked with particular care and dexterity. She cooked about fifty varieties of curry with the admixture of various sweet things. She prepared \textit{Paramanna} and various cakes. She prepared a curry with \textit{Magu-mah} and \textit{Machur} mixed together, where she gave salt, sugar, molasses and ghee and spices, such as \textit{Ada}, \textit{Jani}, \textit{Jira} and \textit{Marich}. Then she fried the meat of castrated goat giving spices. Another curry, known as \textit{Tala}, was cooked with the meat of the pigeon. She prepared another variety of curry with the meat of the tortoise giving there a variety of pulse called \textit{Barkala}. The she seasoned with asafoetida the curry prepared with the root of the plantain tree and the meat of the boar..................A variety of dish known as \textit{Ghanti} with the head of the fish called \textit{Barali} was prepared and then with the other portion of the fish she prepared a curry putting the pulse called \textit{Machur} in it. She cooked other varieties of curries, such as, one with the fish called \textit{Kach}, vegetable called \textit{Bach} and mustard seed; another with the fish called \textit{Sol} and the vegetable called \textit{Mula}, another with meat of the bird \textit{Darik} and bringal and another with the fish called \textit{Ari} and the green leaves called\textsuperscript{239}.

\textsuperscript{239} Manasa Kavya
Palanga. The fishes called Illih and Kandhuli were roasted on a spit. A curry was cooked with the green vegetable called Lapha by giving a kind of lime called Jamir and a king of citron called Solong. She prepared a soup of honey seasoned with ghee, which is pleasing for its highly fragrant smell, not to speak of taking. She prepared soups by mixing sugar in the juice of the Badari fruits and by mixing molasses with ripe tamarind fruits. Thus the cooker made ready about fifty varieties of curries 240.

3.9 Political status of women in mythological age:

In the mythological ages, monarchy was in vogue and there was no democracy, therefore the politics was limited in the hands of the ruling dynasties and the ministers involved. The common men and women did not have any voice to react over the activities of the king. But the women of the royal family were found to be involved in the matter of politics, which is mentioned in the great epics of Ramayana and Mhb. Sita was given the proposal to rule the kingdom as a representative of Rama, when the latter was banished to the forest for fourteen years241. But Sita choses to escort her husband rather than accepting the proposal of ruling the kingdom. In one of the verse of Mhb, Bhisma advised Yudhishthira to endorse the coronations of the daughters of those kings, who had died in the war without leaving any male issues242.

The girls in the ruling class families did receive some training in archery and hunting. Ramayana mentioned about Kekayi, one of the

242. Mhb–XII, 32f, 33.
wives of King Dashratha of Ayodhya, who accompanied her husband in a battle against enemies of Indra243. It is stated in Māhābhārata that Chitrangada, princess of Manipur was taught to use of the bow and arrow. Arjuna first met her while hunting in the forest. Being the only child of her father, Chitrangada was also the perpetual of king Chitravahana’s race. It seems that for that reason she was given all sorts of training so that in absence of King Chitravahana, she could look after her father’s kingdom. Women even sacrificed their lives for the welfare of the country and its people.

If we turn to folk tales of Assam, we come across the most fascinating figure of Kamala Kuanri, who sacrificed herself in order to remove the terrible draught from which her country was suffering. There was not a drop of rain for a length of time and all the rivers, tanks and wells had dried up. Men and cattle died up by thousands. The king saw in a dream that this terrible plague could be removed only, if his beloved queen Kamala is offered as a sacrifice to the God of waters. Kamala embraced this opportunity of serving her country. A large tank was excavated and the patriotic queen was lowered down into it. The water appeared bubbling from the bottom, and the queen was soon surrounded by enveloping mass of water. The subjects witnessed this glorious miracle with dismay and shouted songs of praise to the Gods. Kamala’s sacrifice is commemorated in Assamese folk – songs, which have brought down tears even from adamantine hearts. Legends have a basis, and Kamala

243. Ramayana–Ayodhya Kanda. Cited in ibid, p. 154
244. Māhābhārata, Adi-Parva (Arjuna-Vanavasa Parva).
might rank with the illustrious daughters of the land of Pragjyotisha. From the foregoing discussion it can be safely presumed that the Assamese women mentioned in the legends and mythology played a very important part in all spheres of life, be it society or culture or politics and contributed their valuable share in shaping the destiny of their country.