CHAPTER V

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN

PART I

POLITICAL STATUS

5.I.1 Introduction:

In the ancient and medieval India, woman's main role was trapped in the domestic activities. Gazing through that period, we find that women were mainly confined in the household activities and entrusted the responsibilities and duties of maintaining good order in the family. According to Prof. Indra, "In ancient India, women were never thought fit for any sphere other than the domestic life. The intricate question of administration and government were held to be beyond their comprehension". The only duty they were given was of home management. A hymn on marriage in the RV and AV points out that in the domestic activities, women exercised the supreme authority and ruled over all the members of the family. The other important duty of the married women was to increase her husband's family by producing son. In an unambiguous verse of the AV, the ideal of marriage was stated in

458. Indra, The status of women in ancient India, p.150.
459. RV, X-85-26; AV, X1V-1-43.
as ‘God united the couple so that the wife might beget progeny for her lord and multiply the same, remaining always in the house’\textsuperscript{460}.

Though the main role was limited only inside the four walls of the house, women belonging to the lower strata of the society, besides doing household chores, engaged themselves along with their husbands in the cultivation work and other arts and crafts, in order to maintain the family budget\textsuperscript{461}. Women of the upper strata of the society were not allowed to take any tasks outside the boundaries of the house. Therefore, they used to spend their spare time in spinning and weaving, knitting, embroidery, kitchen-gardening and household decorations. Spinning and Weaving of clothes was one of the oldest industries in the country, which was run successfully by the women-folk inside the house, which is indicated in the RV and AV\textsuperscript{462}.

From the above discussions, we may admit that women were not permitted to go beyond the border of the house. They were thought to be incapable of any type of corporate activities, which was monopolized by men only. Women were even unaware of the political situation of the country. The political upheaval, which was the common feature in the ancient and medieval ages, due to the external attacks and changes of ruling powers, was not their area of concern. They were physically and mentally thought to be too weak to understand and tackle about the political

\textsuperscript{460} AV, VI-81-3.
\textsuperscript{461} Shukra, IV-4-27. cited in Indra, The status of women in ancient India, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{462} AV, X-7-47; XIV-2-5; Rg-Veda, V-47-6. Also S. Br, 12-7-3-2. Taiivai mad Sirmam Karma-Yat Karpas-sutram Yat Urna- sutram.
condition of the country. Therefore, one can hardly expect about the women's participation in the political arena in ancient and medieval period.

5.1.2 Valiant women in ancient India:

As has been pointed above, women were treated as inept for the political affairs of the country. Therefore, they were not given any such physical training as handling of arms or accompanying men in the fields of battle. The Vedic literature does not mention about the daughters as heir to the throne. The post of Yuvaraja was reserved for the eldest male issue. Sukra, one of the ancient lawgivers stated that before installing any of the sons in the throne, all the sons of the king were trained in military art, politics of the state and statecraft. But no such training was given to the daughters as they were excluded from the right of heirship to the throne. In spite of this, we do get the instances of several valiant women in the RV, who directly fought the battle. It mentioned about one Vishpala, the queen of king Khela, who had lost her one leg in a battle, which was replaced with an iron leg by the grace of the Ashvins. Mudgalani or Indra Sena, wife of the sage Mudgala, helped her husband in the tracking down of robbers who had stolen their cows. When the robbers captured her husband, she not only drove the car for her husband but also took up her husband's bow and arrow and defeated the robbers and rescued the state-property. From these instances it is clear that in the Rg-Vedic period, women were conscious about the political matters and if necessary

they did not hesitate to put up with arms and fight with the enemies. Prof.
Indra suggested that some sort of physical and military training was surely
provided to women of the Rg-Vedic period by which they became capable
of fighting and defeating the enemies 466.

The great epic of Ramayana and Mhb also indicated about
the involvement of women in political affairs. Ramayana mentioned about
Kekayi, one of the wives of King Dashratha of Ayodhya, who accompanied
her husband in a battle against enemies of Indra 467. In this period, women
were allowed to sit on the throne in the absence of her husband. Ramayana
narrates that when Rama was banished to the forest for fourteen years,
Sita was given proposal to rule the kingdom as a representative of Rama 468.
It could not turn up because for her, the foremost duty was to escort her
husband in exile rather than to rule the country. 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 issues 469.

The history of ancient India is full of instances of
many such women who sat on the throne and ruled the country either
as a sovereign ruler or regent ruler for their minor sons. Queen Sugandha
and Queen Didda of Kashmir ruled their kingdom not as a regnant, but
as a full sovereign 470. Another queen who ruled as sovereign ruler was

467. Ramayana—Ayodhya Kanda.
469. Mhb—XII, 32f, 33.
470. Indra, The status of women in ancient India, p. 146.
Lilavati of Ceylon. The epigraphs of South India also disclose existence of few women administrators there. Tribhuvana Mahadevi succeeded her husband King Lalitbhadradeva as sovereign ruler. Another ruler was Dandi Mahadevi, who ruled the kingdom on her own authority, though she had a brother. Both Tribhuvan Mahadevi and Dandi Mahadevi belonged to the Kara family and both of them were independent sovereigns and issued charters on their sole authority and also bore the title of Paramabhattarika Maharajadhiraja Parameshwari. The South Indian inscriptions mentions about a Vakataka queen, wife of Rudrasen II, who ruled independently for twenty years in the early part of the Christian era. In Orissa when king Lalitbharanadeva and his son died towards the end of the 9th century A.D., the widowed queen mother ascended the throne and ruled the kingdom successfully till the birth of a grandson. Queen Mother of king Udayana of Kausambi assumed full control of the administration when her son was taken into captivity. Queen Nayanika governed the extensive Satvahana Empire of the Deccan during the minority of her son. Similarly, in the 4th century A.D. after the death of the king of the Vakataka kingdom in Madhya Pradesh, the widowed queen Prabhavatigupta took the charge of the kingdom and ruled for more than 10 years for her minor son.

471. Shakuntala Rao Shastri, Women in the sacred laws, p. 69.
472. Indra, The status of women in ancient India, p. 147.
473. Indra, The status of women in ancient India, p. 147.
5.1.3 Political activities of women in medieval India:

Likewise, in the medieval period we come across many gallant Rajput women who not only administered their kingdom successfully after their husband’s death but also fought heroically for the land of their birth and even laid down their lives at the altar of their country’s freedom. Kurmadevi, the widowed queen of King Samarasi of Mewad not only took the administration of the country in her own hand but also headed her army troops while fighting against Kutub-ud-din. We come across two gallant queens of Rana Sanga of Chittor, namely Karnavati and Jawaharbai. Both of them showed their bravery and died in the battlefield defending the fort of Chittor from the attack of Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat. Similarly, in the Maratha history, Tarabai of Kolhapur, Anubai of Ichalkaranji, Ahalyabai of Indore and Lakshmibai of Jhansai are well known for their skill, diplomacy, efficiency and bravery.

5.1.4 Participation of Assamese women in the political affairs:

The history of Assam was no different from that of Indian history. Throughout the ancient and medieval period, there was no democratic or representative system of government; naturally the question of arising political rights or adult suffrage for male or female does not arise. Only the village assemblies were democratic but only the men folk who were too aged people were allowed to participate in the discussions about the village matters. However, under the monarchical system of

government, generally women were not given any share in the administration of the country. In spite of this, we do get the instances of many Assamese women who were not lagging behind in contributing in the administration by shouldering responsibilities as viceroys, governors, regents and managers of different institutions. Some ambitious women even manipulated political authority. They either ruled the country directly as a ruler or deftly influenced the court politics from behind the curtain. Some of them even fought gallantly at the head of their troops showing their valour in the battlefield. Let us first discuss about the women administrator in ancient Assam.

5.1.5 Women ruler in ancient Assam:

In ancient Assamese history, there are references to women who actively participated in political activities with dexterity by sitting on the throne. Mention may be made of Narirajya referred to in the Mlib. The epic stated that Arjuna after performing Ashwamedha Yajna (for extending his sovereignty over the other kingdom) left his horse, which entered Manipur passing through Narirajya\textsuperscript{480}. According to some historians, this Narirajya was modern Jaintia hills\textsuperscript{481}. Narirajya was also known as Promilarajya or Strirajya that was ruled by the Jaintias in ancient times is referred to in the Jamini Bharata and Rajatarangini\textsuperscript{482}. According to Ahmed\textsuperscript{483}, this kingdom had a strange system of government wherein the

\textsuperscript{482} Cited in Soumen Sen (edited), Women in Meghalaya, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{483} S.S. Ahmed, ibid.
state was ruled over by the womenfolk and men were engaged in agricultural production and only in case of external dangers, they could come up for protection. But the authors like Madhavananda and R.C. Majumdar opine that the kingdom of Strirajya was not ruled by any queen, but it was having a male king. But this statement is unlikely as the name of the state Narirajya or Strirajya itself means the "kingdom of women". Even some tantrik work of later period proves the authenticity of Narirajya. The Buddhist tantrik work of Pag Som Zon Zan, referred to the ancient kingdom of Kadali situated in the modern Nowgong district. The place is also associated with the activities of two famous Buddhist tantriks namely Minanatha and Gorakshanatha of a little later period than Brahmapala. An elaborate description of the kingdom is found in the Bengali lyrics of Gorakshavijaya and Mainamatir Gaan. These works state that in the end of the 10th and 11th century A.D., a courageous woman named Kamala, with the help of her sister Mangala and ministers, ruled the kingdom, which was popularly known at that time as Narirajya. The Kingdom had a retinue of sixteen hundred females who discharged the functions of her ministers, cashiers, clerks, bodyguards, etc. The male population was very poor and the females who were prominent in every affair of the country carried on business intercourse with the neighbouring country of Kamrup. This kingdom of Narirajya was located by some in Manipur or Burma or Cachar or even in the North-Western Frontier.

485. 'R.M. Nath, Kondoli and the Kadali Kingdom' in Readings in the History and Culture of Assam, p. 126.
486. Goraksha-Bijoy, ed. by A.K. Sahitya Visharad, p. 197
487. Mainamatir Gaan, ed. by N.K. Bhattasali &Sircar
488. Mainamatir Gaan, p. 22f.
489. H.C. Chakladar, Social life in Ancient India, pp. 59-60.
but it is rather to be located in the Kadali, Nowgong, ruled probably by a Kachari or Jaintia queen\textsuperscript{490}, enjoying the liberty accorded to women by the Tantrik-Buddhists. According to P.C. Choudhury, the queen was ruling the kingdom possibly as feudatory of the Palas of Assam\textsuperscript{491}.

Another woman ruler of ancient Assam was one Mayanamati\textsuperscript{492}, the queen of Manikchandra of Rangpur (presently situated in Bangladesh, which was in ancient period a part of Assam). After the death of the latter, King Dharmapala of Dharmapura, who married Vanamali, the sister of Mayanamati, dared to take possession of the Kingdom of Manikchandra. But queen Mayanamati wanted to install her son Gopichandra on the throne of his father. Dharmapala was against this proposal. Therefore the widowed queen of Manikchandra had no other solution than asserting war against Dharmapala. Before that she formed a conspiracy with the ministers of Dharmapala and won over them on her side. A terrible battle on the bank of Tista was fought between queen Mayanamati and Dharmapala, where queen doggedly restored the kingdom of her husband by giving a fitting rebuff to the aggressive Dharmapala and installed her son Gopichandra on the throne with great élan.

5.1.6 Political participation of women in the Assamese folk tales:

The folk-tales and legends also speak of such women who were not only courageous but also sacrificed their life for the welfare of

\textsuperscript{490} R.M. Nath, JARS., VII, pp. 19-23.
\textsuperscript{491} P.C. Choudhury, The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 229.
the country and its people. One such figure was Kamala Kunwari who sacrificed her life in order to save the country from the terrible drought. It is said\(^493\) that once the country was suffering from a terrible famine due to the dearth of monsoon. All the rivers, tanks and wells had dried and innumerable people along with cattle lost their lives. In the meantime, the king saw in a dream that the country could only get rid of this dreadful drought and plague, if he offered as a sacrifice his beloved queen Kamala to the God of waters. The king though hesitated, but Kamala embraced this opportunity to serve the country. Therefore, a large tank was excavated and the patriotic queen was sunk into it. As soon as the queen was offered to the water, the rain started and the people got rid of the dangerous drought. The subjects also witnessed this glorious miracle with dismay and shouted songs of praise to the Gods. Kamala’s sacrifice is commemorated in Assamese folk songs. The reality of the story is uncertain, but the legends had some basis and it proves that the women of Assam were not lagging behind to serve their motherland.

5.1.7 Political role of women in medieval Assam:

The history of medieval Assam beginning with the 13\(^{th}\) century till the implementation of the British colonial rule in the early 19\(^{th}\) century changed its map frequently. After the disintegration of the Pala kingdom, many new kingdoms and independent territories arose like those of the kingdoms of Kamata, the Koches, the Bhuyans, the Morans, the Barahis, the Kalitas, the Chutiyas, the Kacharis, the Jayantias and the

Ahoms. All these kingdoms were always engaged in war to establish their domination by suppressing the others. But ultimately, the Ahoms subjugated most of these tribes and built a united kingdom expanding from Sadiya in the east to Manaha River in the west. If we gawk through this period, we find that the history is full of examples of accomplished women who participated in politics and administration either as a ruler or as a head of their troops in the battlefield. Some of the women, who could not serve the country directly, involved themselves in the political affairs of the state by giving valuable suggestions to the king. Let us first go through such women who ruled the country as ruler.

5.1.7.1 Women as queen regent:

The first instance we come across was of the chief queen of Ahom king Taokhamti (1380-89). After Taokhamti occupied the throne of Ahom kingdom, his first mission was against the Chutiyas to take avenging action for the death of Ahom king Sutupha (1364-76), who was treacherously killed by Chutiyas during a friendly visit to their kingdom. Before going out for expedition, Taokhamti appointed his chief queen as regent to look after the administration of the kingdom. The barren queen was power loving and jealous of her co-wife (mother of Ahom king Sudangpha). The latter was not only king’s favourite queen, but also an expectant mother at that time. The chief queen misused the authority entrusted to her by appointing and dismissing officers at her own resolve. The most heinous crime she did was by ordering the execution of her co-wife on charge of an alleged adultery. But the men who were to carry
out the orders secretly spared the unfortunate victim of her life. They set her adrift on the Brahmaputra. A Brahman saved her life and gave shelter in his house at Habung. But her condition was critical. So, in spite of his best effort, the Brahman could not survive the life of the ill-fated queen. She died after giving birth to a son. This son afterwards became the powerful king of the Ahom kingdom namely Sudangpha (1397-1407). Because he was grown up and looked after by the Brahman as his own son, he was also known as Bamuni Konwar\textsuperscript{494}.

5.1.7.2 Women ruler in Ahom period:

Contrary to the chief queen of king Taokhamti, who misrepresented her power by doing infamous work, we get the instances of few queens, who achieved great success as a ruler. Queen Phuleswari, queen Ambika and queen Sarbeswari, the three consorts of Ahom king Siva Singha (1714-44) ruled the kingdom successfully, thus leaving remarkable records to their successors to be inspired with their ideals. These three queens had directly ruled the country successively assuming the title 'Bar-Raja'. King Siva Singha was greatly influenced by Brahman priests and astrologers. In 1722, his spiritual guides and astrologers forecasted that he was under the evil influence of the stars (Chatra-bhanga-yoga). As a result he could be dethroned in the near future. Therefore, to avoid the wrath of the stars, he was advised by the priest and astrologer to hand over the charge of the administration of the kingdom to some convinced person. The king, at the instruction of the Parvatiya Gosain (Priest)

\textsuperscript{494}. SAB, p. 9.
Krishnaram Bhattacharya, resolded to bestow the supreme vest of his kingdom to his chief queen Phuleswari. The latter accordingly took the regalia to her hands, changed her name from Phuleswari to Pramatheswari and assumed the title ‘Bar-Raja’ or the ‘chief-king’ and minted coins in the joint names of her and her husband where she used the Persian legend the first of its kind in Assam⁴⁹⁵.

Besides her fair name, the religious intolerance and bigotry of Queen Phuleswari brought about a dreadful civil war in the country which continued down for half a century, thereby disintegrating the strength of the country to such an extent that the once glorious Assamese nation, “who had not bowed the head of submission and obedience, nor had they paid tribute or revenue to the most powerful monarch; but who had curbed the ambition and checked the conquests of the most victorious princes of Hindustan ........... and had baffled the penetration of heroes who had been styled conquerors of the world”⁴⁹⁶, became an easy prey to the first touch of Burmese spear.

It seems that Phuleswari was more under the influence of the Brahmans, particularly the Parvatiya Gosain, in comparison to her husband. At the initiation of the Gosain, she intended to give Saktism the designation of state religion. To implement her plan fervently, she organized a Durga puja in a Sakti shrine and summoned all the Vaisnava preceptors and Sudra Mahantas. The Vaisnava creed of Assam enjoined upon all its

⁴⁹⁵. E.A. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 188.
followers a rigid avoidance of any association with the worship of Sakti or Durga and the most orthodox among them will not even cast a glance at any image, not to speak of any animal sacrifice made before the Goddess of power. But the Gosains had no other alternative but to obey, as the command came from a sovereign to whom they were bound by the customs of the country to display implicit homage and obedience. So the Vaisnava Gosains went to the royal court near the hall of worship. They were obliged to bow their heads before the goddess, have their foreheads besmeared with the blood of the sacrificed animals and accepted nirmali and prasad\textsuperscript{497}. All the Vaisnava preceptors and Mahantas were very offended by the act of sacrilege by the queen. More than others, the powerful Mayamara Mahantas considered it as a serious insult to them\textsuperscript{498}. As a consequence, this incident began the confrontation of Maomariyas against the Ahom kingdom, which resulted in Maomariya Rebellion in the near future, which was one of the most important factors for the collapse of the Ahom monarchy.

Phuleswari also changed the age-old burial system of the Ahoms and introduced the system of burning the dead\textsuperscript{499}. Queen Phuleswari offered many important titles to her own relatives. Her brother Harinath was first made Bargohain and later Barpatra Gohain\textsuperscript{500}, her uncle Joyananda was made Dekial Barua and three of the maternal uncles subsequently were made Khanikar Barua, Chaudang Barua and Debi-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{497} ABHB, p. 71.
\item \textsuperscript{498} ABHB, p. 71.
\item \textsuperscript{499} TB, 2nd edition, p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{500} TB, 2nd edition, p. 41.
\end{itemize}
gharar Barua\textsuperscript{501}. She also did some construction works. The Gaurisagar tank near the capital city was excavated by her and three temples were constructed on its bank dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi. She was also a great patron of Sanskrit learning and started a Sanskrit school in the palace campus and also donated a number of lands\textsuperscript{502}.

After the death of Queen Phuleswari in 1731, king Siva Singha married her sister Draupadi. She was renamed as Ambika and was replaced in the place of Phuleswari as ‘Bar-Raja’. This queen was a great sponsor of learning and education. At her inspiration the composition of the \textit{Hasti Vidyarnava}, a great work on elephantology of international repute was created. Like her sister, some construction works were on her credit. The Sivasagar tank at Rangpur was excavated by Queen Ambika, which is the second biggest tank in Assam. On its bank, she erected the three temples dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi\textsuperscript{503}. The Siva temple with its large gold-covered dome is the biggest and the tallest of the temples in Assam. After her death in 1738, she was succeeded as ‘Bar-Raja’ by another wife of Siva Singha, named Enadari, who was renamed as Sarveswari. Emulating the senior two ‘Bar-Rajas’ she also built a temple at Sibsagar in the honour of her mother-in-law Keri Rajmao\textsuperscript{504}.

Thus the three ‘Bar-Rajas’ administered the state in their own style. Though the king helped the queens by giving valuable suggestions, but he did not meddle too much in the activities of the queens. The three

\textsuperscript{501} H. Barbarua, \textit{Ahomar Din}, p. 244.
\textsuperscript{502} H. Barbarua, \textit{Ahomar Din}, p. 244.
\textsuperscript{503} TB, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{504} P. Gogoi, Tai and Tai Kingdom, p. 512.
consorts of king Siva Singha namely Phuleswari, Ambika and Sarveswari ruled the country successfully except a few instances of the display of feminine indiscretion. About their success, Charles Rose, who in his edition of the correspondence of Lord Cornwallis wrote about the government of Assam by Queens, “..............The Assamese were a most warlike nation, and had for a length of time successfully resisted all foreign invaders. Even Aurangzeb had failed. They never prospered more than when governed by females, as was the case in earlier part of the eighteenth century”505.

5.1.7.3 Role of queens in politics:

Though we do not get any other instances of queens, ruling directly as a ruler, but they influenced the court politics remaining behind the main scene. In this context, we can mention the name of queen Chauching, the consort of Swargadeo Suklenmung, popularly known as Gargayan Raja (1539-1552). She was the combination of brain and beauty. The king often used to take her suggestions in the affairs of the state politics. She diplomatically created the office of the Barpatra Gohain, the third minister of the Ahom Kingdom. The queen attracted the King by giving the logical argument506 that the administration of the country was like a cooking pot, which was balanced only when it was placed over three supports. In the same way the balance of the government of the Ahom kingdom could not be depend on only two ministers. Therefore, the creation of the third minister was essential to maintain the balance of the administration. After the post of third minister was created, the Buragohain

506. ABSM, p. 27.
and Borgohain raised great objection. Then she clarified that, “The creation of the third noble in the king’s cabinet is only just and proper. You cannot place the golden vessel of the country’s administration on two supports only. A third support is indispensable, and the king has given you that”507. The Buranji also recorded that according to her suggestion the King fortified the Ahom capital, which was thenceforth called Garhgaon or the city of ramparts and the king achieved the title Gargayan Raja508.

Another woman Nangabakla Gabharu, wife of the premier Thaomunglung Borgohain was a very daring lady and set an example of courage and determination. She even did not hesitate to arraign the king and his ministers in the open court when they decided to send her son as a hostage to the Koch king after their defeat in the hands of the latter509. During the reign of Chaopha Sukhampha, alias Khora Raja (1553-1603), the Ahoms were terribly defeated by the Koches in the battles fought at the mouths of the Dikhou and Handia rivers in 1562. The Ahom king then concluded a treaty with the Koch king Naranarayana on most humiliating terms, according to which not only did the former acknowledged the suzerainty of the Koches, but also surrendered the whole territory on the bank of the Brahmaputra and promised to pay war indemnity to the Koch king. Along with these terms, the Ahom king also agreed to deliver the sons of the chief nobles as hostages to the Koch kingdom. When it was decided to send Borgohain Thaomunglung’s son along with the son of other nobles as hostages, the Borgohain’s wife Chaochao Nangbakla

507. ABSM, p. 27.
508. ABSM, p. 27.
509. ABGB, p. 87.
fiercely protested her husband refusing to send her son to the Koch capital by saying, “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 was so bold that she even reprimanded the king and his ministers in the open court for their disastrous defeat at the hands of the Koches stating thus, “What kind of a king you are and what kind of ministers you are. You could not defeat even the Koches. Why should I allow my son to be sent to Koch-Behar? Your war with the Koch king resulted in your defeat and this is due to your tactlessness and inaction.” She further said, “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 was resolute to send his son to the Koch kingdom. At this Nangbakla wrenched her son away from her husband’s hands uttering boldly the following words, “who can give my son? If the course of the Dikhau River can be diverted upwards to the hill by putting a dam across it, then only my son may be given.” The king did not gather sufficient courage to argue with her and seeing her sentiments dropped the idea of sending her son as hostage and instead he sent his own brother.

5.1.7.4 Participation of women in battle:

In this period, women like Nangbakla Gabharu not only dared to challenge the king but was also courageous enough to take up the arms
and fight in the battle against the enemy. In this perspective we can refer to Mula Gabharu, wife of Ahom commander Phrasenmung Borgohain. The latter was a very efficient and courageous General of the Ahom army. Therefore when Turbak Khan, the Muslim General from Bengal invaded Assam in 1532 A.D., the then Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539) appointed Phrasenmung to fight against the Muslim army. Phrasenmung not only defeated the Muslim army but also killed the Muslim General Hayat Khan in the first battle, which was fought at Kaliabar near the confluence of the Kalang and the Brahmaputra. But unfortunately, in the second battle, which was fought near the Ahom fort at Singri, Phrasenmung along with eight Ahom commanders, were killed in the battlefield during their fight against Turbak Khan. When Mula Gabharu, the valiant wife of the late Ahom General heard the news of the demise of her husband, she did not sit and cry for her husband like the common women. She boldly took up the arms and proceeded to the battlefield along with five of her women companions to fight the battle against the Muslim army. She gallantly fought against Turbak Khan and sacrificed her life for the country. Her moving and inspiring loyalty rekindled patriotism among the Ahom soldiers. They immediately mustered strong in defending the castle and finally were successful to defeat the Muslim army in the third battle fought at Duimunisila, above Kaliabar. The valour and patriotism of Mula Gabharu is still proudly remembered by the Assamese people, specially by the women folk.

511. ABSM, p. 18; PAB, pp. 59; SAB, p. 69.
Not only the Ahom ladies, but women of different kingdoms also exhibited their heroism in the battlefield. Mention may be made of Bhatuki and Bhabuli, two wives of Maomariya leader Nahar Khora, who took the names of Radha and Rukmini respectively. The instigation of the Maomariya revolution was inducted by these two audacious ladies. In October, 1769 the Maomariyas refused men of the Ahom kingdom to enter and cut timbers in the Maran area. They not only stopped the men of Ahom kingdom to enter into the Maran boundaries but also declared their independence by refusing to accept the suzerainty of the Ahom King. To stop this uprising the then Ahom king Lakshmi Singha sent an Ahom army of 2000 soldiers under the command of Tekela Barua named Bez. But the royal forces of the Ahom king were seriously defeated under the leadership of Radha and Rukmini. About the extra-ordinary bravery shown by Radha and Rukmini in the battlefield, Tekela Barua, who made a hair-breadth escape in the battle against Maomariyas, informed the king that the two female leaders possessed supernatural powers by whose strength they caught the bullets in their chadars or wrappers. The Ahom soldiers were easily defeated in different spots. The credit goes to these two ladies in establishing the Maomariya rule by defeating the Ahom royal forces by their undaunted courage. The Ahom king Lakshmi Singha was captured by Maomariyas and confined in the Jaysagar temple and his chief queen Kuranganayani was forcibly taken as wife by Raghava, one of the Maomariya insurgent leaders, who later hold the post of Barbarua in the

512. TB, p. 57.
513. TB, pp. 57f.
514. S.L. Barua, A comprehensive History of Assam, p. 309.
new kingdom\textsuperscript{515}. Ramakanta, son of one of the wives (Radha or Rukmini) of Nahar Khora was made the king of the new kingdom. The Maomariya insurgents did one great mistake by forcibly capturing Kuranganayani, the queen of Lakshmi Singha. They had to pay a heavy price for that by losing their precious lives and newly captured kingdom.

5.1.7.5 Diplomacy of queens:

Kuranganayani, the Manipuri consort of Ahom king Rajeswar Singha (1757-69) and later of his brother Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) was a combination of diplomacy and courage. When Raghava, the Maomariya leader forced her to become his wife, she secretly kept her touch with the royalist supporters. Through her machination the victory of the Maomariyas was counteracted by the royalist supporters. She could not forget the force applied on her to become the wife of Raghava and she was in search of opportunity to take retaliation against Raghava and other Maomariya leaders. The golden opportunity came in the form of \textit{Bahag Bihu} on 14\textsuperscript{th} April 1770 (Assamese New year day). She, with the support of the Ahom royal forces, organized a strong counter offensive against the rebellion in which she played the key role. According to the tradition of the country, the royal soldiers dressed as like Bihu dancers approached towards the palace to celebrate the Bihu festival. Raghava along with his acquaintances came out of the palace to enjoy the Bihu celebrations. When Raghava, according to the suggestion of Kuranganayani bowed before the Bihu congregation, Kuranganayani struck Raghava’s thigh with the sword, which she kept concealed in her garment\textsuperscript{516}. Following the

\textsuperscript{515}\ S.L. Barua, A comprehensive History of Assam, p. 312.
\textsuperscript{516}\ S.K. Bhuyan, An Assamese Nurjahan, p. 9.
queen's instruction the royalist soldiers dressed in Bihu dancers, attacked Raghava and other Maomariya leaders. Being armless, Raghava and other Maomariyas were dismayed at the sudden attack of the royalist soldiers. Raghava, Ramakanta and Nahar Khora were killed and Lakshmi Singha was released from the captivity of the rebellions and reinstalled on the Ahom throne. After the restoration, King Lakshmi Singha did not want to take any risk, so he killed all the leaders of the Maomariyas. Even the lives of Radha and Rukmini were not spared517.

5.1.7.6 Sacrifice of the women for country:

Women of the upper stratum of the society were fully cognizant about the political circumstances of the country. They not only kept the knowledge of the political state of affairs, but also sacrificed their lives for the interest of the country. In this context, the first name that comes in our mind is that of Sati Jaimati. The Assamese people will always remember her for her unique patriotism and sacrifice for her motherland. Jaimati was the daughter of Laithepena Bargohain and wife of Gadapani (later became the Ahom King named as Gadadhar Singha), of the Tungkhungia royal family. After the death of the Ahom king Udayaditya Singha (1671-73), the political turbulence started in the Ahom kingdom. This political unsteadiness continued till Gadadhar Singha captured the Ahom throne in 1681. Between 1673-1681 the Ahom kingdom became the center of various court intrigues and conspiracies. During this period the different Ahom nobles became so powerful that they started exercising

517. S.L. Barua, A comprehensive history of Assam, p. 313.
power to make kings and officers according to their own convenience and self-interest. The kings were only the dummies in the hands of different Ahom nobles. One such powerful noble was Laluk Sola *Barphukan*. He became the de facto ruler of the Ahom kingdom by making a 14 yr old prince Ratnadhvaj Singha as king, who was also known as ‘Lara-Raja’. But Laluk Sola’s lust for power was not satisfied only by becoming Kingmaker. The real motivation of *Barphukan* was to become the real king of the Ahom kingdom. Gait comments, “It is said that he communicated his design to the Emperor of Delhi, who sent a reply conveying his approval, but whether this be true or not, there is no doubt that he openly asserted his equality with the king.” There was a hurdle in fulfilling his offensive motivation. According to the Ahom right of kingship, only the direct descendants of Sukapha on the male line were eligible to sit on the Ahom throne. To clear this obstacle, Laluk Sola found a new way to eliminate all the eligible claimants of the Ahom throne by declaring the new Ahom right of kingship. According to the new theory, any prince with physical disability or injury or even with any pock-marked on the visible parts of the body was debarred from becoming the king. Applying this principle, he under the order of the puppet king, not only disqualified, but also killed or mutilated numerous scions of the royal family under the order of the puppet king.

Laluk’s main target of attack was Gadapani, who was not only physically fit, but from all sides he was the formidable candidate.

---

518. E.A. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 156.
for the Ahom throne. He had the capacity to set things in order to the prevailing situation of the anarchy and misrule. On the other hand, king Sulikpha Lara-Raja also wanted to finish Gadapani because the astrologers intimated to the king that his destruction would come from prince Gadapani\textsuperscript{521}. Hence the pursuit of Gadapani was taken up so vehemently and obstinately. Due to apprehension of persecution of Laluk and the king, Gadapani first kept himself concealed in Naga Hills as fugitive, and then he took shelter near Rani in Kamrup in the house of a Garo woman in the mask of a common peasant. To extract clues about the whereabouts of Gadapani, his wife Jaimati, who was expected mother at that time, was brought to the court and interrogated. Jaimati was confident about her husband’s ability and she knew that Gadapani was the only person who could restore the lost glory of the Ahom monarchy and she herself requested Gadapani to protect himself for the welfare of the country\textsuperscript{522}. She was determined to sacrifice her life rather than disclose the whereabouts of her husband. When she refused to disclose anything about the secrecy of her husband, the officials of the Ahom court physically tortured her to death at Jerenga Pathar\textsuperscript{523}. Her unique sacrifice for the cause of her husband and hence for her country catapulted her to the status of one of the greatest women adorned with lofty ideals in the history of Assam. Her sacrifice did not go in vain. The other nobles and officers became agitated with the activities of the Barphukan. The latter was therefore assassinated in 1680 and Gadapani was declared king by the

\textsuperscript{521} TB, Intro, p. xviii.
\textsuperscript{522} TB, p. 14
\textsuperscript{523} TB, p. 14; ABHB, p. 54; Asamar Padya Buranjii, chap. 1.
nobles and chief officers of the Ahom court. Gadapani assumed the name Gadadhar Singha and ruled the country for more than 14 years and devoted his whole reign to restore the waning prestige and power of the Ahom monarchy. Rudra Singha (1696-1714), the son of Gadadhar Singha and Jaimati, excavated the Jaysagar tank in Rangpur, which is the biggest tank in Assam and a temple called Jaydaul built by its side, to commemorate his mother’s sacrifice.

Ramani Gabharu’s love for the country was also very exclusive. She was the daughter of Ahom king Jayadhwaja Singha (1648-63), granddaughter of Momai Tamuli Barbarua and niece of Lachit Barphukan. She was sent to Mughal harem in her minor stage as a sequel to the treaty concluded between the Mughals and the Ahoms on January 22, 1663 after the latter’s defeat at the hands of the great Mughal general Mir Jumla. When she was grown up, her name was changed from Ramani Gabharu to Rahmat Banu and she was married off to Sultan Azam, the third son of Emperor Aurangzeb. One of her maternal uncle was Laluk Sola Barphukan. We have already discussed about his yearn for supremacy. To satisfy his self-interest he entered into treasonable correspondences with Sultan Azam, who was then Viceroy of Bengal. According to the proposal he appealed for Mughal help to make him the king of Assam, in return for which, he agreed to surrender Gauhati to the Mughals524. After knowing about the treacherous proposal of Laluk Sola, Ramani Gabharu could not tolerate her uncle’s unpatriotic and treacherous act. Belonging to the family of such patriotic persons like Jayadhwaja Singha, Momai Tamuli Barbarua

and Lachit Barphukan, she had the genuine love for her birth land. But being the Begum of Sultan Azam, she could not do anything directly to save the independence of her motherland. The only possibility for her was to desist her uncle to do such ignoble action. Therefore, she wrote a very spirited letter to her uncle stating that surrendering Gauhati means offering the heart of Assam to the Mughals. Though her power-loving uncle did not give any importance to her letter, but Ramani Gabharu will always be remembered for her genuine love towards her country and its people.

The Chutiya queen Sadhani was another instance of sacrifice and patriotism. Sadhani was the daughter of Chutiya king Dhirnarayan and queen Lilabati. It was said that the couple was childless for a long period. After a long penance or Sadhana, the royal couple was blessed with a female child. Because her birth was due to strenuous penance or Sadhana, she was named as Sadhani. With education, she was given all sorts of training regarding administration. To get a perfect match for her daughter, king Dhirnarayan arranged a Swayambara Sabha for the marriage of Sadhani. The king made a promise that his daughter will tie the nuptial knot with that person who would be able to hit the squirrel on a tree in front of the royal court by using bow and arrow. The kings, princes and dignitaries of different kingdoms, invited in the Swayambara Sabha failed to achieve the difficult task. At last, a Chutiya youth, Nitipal, who belonged to an ordinary family, succeeded in piercing the body of the squirrel with an arrow. Though Nitipal was not equal to her from any

525. For details, see S.K. Bhuyan's Ramani Gabharu (in Assamese).
526. "Sadhani – The famous queen of the Chutiyas of Assam": Dr. N.N. Acharya, Souvenir, edt Shri Prem Saran and Shri B.C. Barbarua.
side, either from rank, dignity and upbringing, Sadhani married him just to fulfill the promise made by her father king Dhir Narayan.

To bring Nitipal in his own status, king Dhirnarayan abdicated the throne in favour of his son-in-law which proved to be one of the greatest mistakes of king Dhirnarayan and which led to the downfall of the Chutiyia kingdom. Nitipal became the king assuming the name Chandranarayan. As the latter did not belong to royal blood, he was inexperienced about the statecraft and diplomacy. Therefore he was guided by his queen Sadhani in the administrative work. Due to the inefficiency of Nitipal, disorder and confusion began to arise in the Chutiyia kingdom. Taking advantage of this situation, the Ahoms attacked the Chutiyia kingdom in 1523 and seriously defeated the Chutiyas. Then Chutiyia king proposed peace to the Ahom king Suhungmung. The latter was ready to accept peace on the condition that Chutiyia king should handover the Chutiyia heirlooms, i.e., the gold cat, gold elephant and gold umbrella. On suggestion of Sadhani, king Chandranarayan sent a princess with other rich presents but refused to handover the heirloom. The refusal led to continue the war. The Chutiyia king Chandranarayan was killed. The brave queen Sadhani, to evade humiliation in the hands of the enemy jumped at a stream from the Chandangiri hill.

528. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 83
529. According to the Chutiyia Buranj incorporated in DAB, both Chandranarayan and his queen committed suicide by throwing themselves from the top of the Chandangiri hill. On the other hand the DAB, p. 19 states that the Ahoms also killed the Chutiyia queen and her head was presented before the Ahom king.
5.1.7.7 Women's participation in politics behind the curtain:

Pijau Gabharu, the daughter of Badan Chandra *Bar-Phukan*, who was married to Oreshenath, the third son of Purnananda *Burhagohain* also played a role in politics. The relation between Purnananda and Badan Chandra was not cordial from the very beginning. Since the accession of Kamaleshwar Singha (1795-1811) in the Ahom throne, Purnanda became the de facto ruler of the Ahom kingdom. On the other hand Badan Chandra was a very ambitious person and to get the power he achieved the post of *Barphukan* by inducing sixty thousand rupees to the Barkandaz leader Hazara Singh in an extremely offensive way. On getting the information, Purnananda *Burhagohain* was highly dissatisfied by the act of Badan Chandra and immediately dismissed him from the post and appointed a new *Barphukan* namely Kalia Bhomora. Badan Chandra, who thenceforth nourished ill feeling against the *Burhagohain*, considered this a great insult. Badan Chandra was in search of circumstances to take avenge from the *Burhagohain* and this came through his daughter Pijau *Gabharu*, who was married to the third son of Purnananda *Burhagohain*.

Bounded by this marital bondage, Purnananda reinstated Badan Chandra in his former position after the death of Kalia Bhomora *Barphukan*. Appointing Badan Chandra in the post of *Barphukan* was a great mistake done by Purnananda *Burhagohain* because it not only cost of the latter's life but also the freedom of Assam. The Ahom monarchy

was totally destroyed by Burmese invasion due to the inactivity of Badan Chandra.

Being only Barphukan and that to remain subservient under Burhagohain did not suit Badan Chandra, who was a power loving and self-interested person. He wanted to achieve the supreme power, which was, then in the hold of Purnananda Burhagohain. Jealous of the latter and lust for power, Badan Chandra approached the king to permit him to manage the revenue of Kamrup at his own discretion. But Burhagohain intervened in the matter and rejected the proposal. Being refused of the proposal, he took the reprisal by creating commotion among the people of Kamrup through an intoxicated elephant. Many reports came to Purnananda Burhagohain against Badan Chandra of his growing arrogance and misusing the post and power by utilizing a considerable share of the custom duties at Kandhar and making land-grants to temples and Satras in his own name. The main rift between the Burhagohain and Barphukan was said to be the ban order of consumption and cultivation of opium by the former, which was disregarded by Badan Chandra.

The relations between Burhagohain and Barphukan reached at a last stage when the latter associated with the conspiracy of Satram, the king’s favourite, to assassinate the Burhagohain. However, the plot was discovered. Satram, at the king’s intercession was banished to Namrup, where he was killed by some Nagas. The royal force was sent to

---

531. S.L. Barua, A comprehensive History of Assam, p. 360.
533. MS. Assam Buranj containing accounts of miscellaneous events from earliest times to Swargadeo Rudra Singha.
apprehend the Barphukan. But the daughter of the latter Pijau Gabharu however came to know the plot of her father-in-law and warned her father by sending an express message regarding the intention of the Burhagohain. Showing love and affection towards her father, Pijau Gabharu non-intentionally brought about a great disaster for her motherland. Being warned in time, Badan Chandra spared no time and fled away to Bengal where he approached the Governor General of East India Company and persuaded for help to install a war against Burhagohain by misrepresenting that the latter had subverted and seized the king’s authority and the entire country was in danger due to his misconduct. But after getting the negative response from the Governor General, he moved to the Burmese king Badawpaya at the court of Amarapura and succeeded in getting the help of the Burmese King, Badawpaya. The Burmese soldiers on instigation of Barphukan attacked Assam. Though the Burhagohain sent an army to oppose the invaders but was defeated in the battle of Giladhari soldiers in 1817. At this juncture the Burhagohain died or as some say, committed suicide by swallowing diamonds. His death was a great loss for Assam because he was the person, who restored the Ahom monarchy by suppressing the revolution of the neighbouring land, removed all possibilities of a recurrence of any internal commotion and prevailed the interference in the Ahom kingdom from the foreign intervention. Moreover, the people of Assam had a great faith on him. Before he finally completed his great task of the regeneration and reconstruction of the country, the Burmese

invaders appeared on the scene, reducing the once prosperous valley of Assam practically to a desert. Though the dream of Badan Chandra to get the power was fulfilled, but the latter will always be criticized for the exhibition of his narrow self-interest at the cost of the independence of Assam.

5.1.7.8 Political influence of Queen mothers:

The Queen mothers were also not lagging behind in intervening in the matter of politics. One such Queen mother was Numali Rajmao, mother of the Ahom king Kamaleshwar Singha (1795-1811) and king Chandrakanta Singha (1811-1817) who had a great influence in the administration of the Ahom kingdom during the reign of her sons. It has been already discussed that during the reign of the above two Ahom kings, the real administration was in the hands of the premier Purnananda Burhagohain. Though Purnananda was used to govern the country but he was used to take the help of Rajmao in the matter of statecraft. She was very diplomatic and far-sighted in the political affairs of the state. So Purnananda sought the advice and guidance of the Rajmao before implementing any subject of the statecraft. During the reign of Kamaleshwar Singha and Chandrakanta Singha the Ahom monarchy was facing a critical situation of internal disturbances and the insurgence of neighbouring lands. In this difficult situation, Rajmao helped Purnananda by consulting and giving valuable suggestions to him in all complicated matters of the state. Along with Purnananda Burhagohain, Rajmao also was fed up by the arrogance and atrocities committed by Badan Chandra upon the innocent
187

subjects of Kamrup. She was very upset at the death of Purnananda Burhagohain and could not forgive Badan Chandra for his activities. After the first Burmese invasion the latter became the de facto ruler of the Ahom kingdom, which the Rajmao could not tolerate. Therefore, when a quarrel ensued between Badan Chandra and Barbarua Dhani, the queen mother leaned towards the Barbarua and on her instigation Badan Chandra was assassinated by a mercenary soldier Rup Singh539.

5.1.7.9 Influence of the Assamese women in the court of Burma:

Some Assamese women influenced the court politics of Burmese king also. In this connection, we find that a daughter of one Ahom prince Bijay Barmura Gohain was presented to the Burmese king Badawpaya in 1797540. This princess soon became a cynosure of Burmese king and the latter made her his favourite consort. It is said541 that the people of the entire city celebrated on her arrival at the Burmese capital Ava. The entire town was decorated by unprecedented pomp and magnificence. Many sweepers were appointed to swept the roads and clear the entire city. The most expensive and stylish articles were exhibited on the shops for the occasion and cannon were accumulated at every corner of the streets. Captain Cox, the British Resident at Ava wrote in his diary on June 26, 1797, "In compliance with a request from the king, and with a view to conciliation, I have decorated my house in honour of the arrival of an Assamese princess for his Majesty"542. Badawpaya, to reward his newly

539. ABHB, p. 88; TB, p. 200
married consort and also to fulfill his imperialistic desire against the British, renewed his attempt to place the father of his Assamese consort on the throne of Assam in August 1797543.

Another eminent lady in the harem of Burmese king Badawpaya was Rangili. Badan Chandra was successful in getting aid from the Burmese king Badawpaya due to the influence of Rangili, the Assamese consort of the latter. Rangili, who belonged to the respectable Assamese aristocrat family, was offered by Purnananda Burhagohain to a powerful Singhpho Chieftain Bichanong as peace proposition in 1805544. Bichanong in his turn presented Rangili to the Burmese king Badawpaya. The princess soon became a favourite of the Burmese monarch. Her influence on the Burmese king is best illustrated by her ability to persuade the Burmese king to assist a force of Burmese soldiers to Badan Chandra Barphukan, when he was a fugitive at Amarapura for 16 months545. Badawpaya, conceding to the queen’s pursuit, sent a strong army of 8,000 to assist Badan Chandra546.

Hemo Aidew was another important Assamese lady, who was presented along with a heavy indemnity to the Burmese Commanders by Badan Chandra after the first Burmese invasion. Hemo was handed over to the Burmese king Badawpaya by the Burmese commanders547. She influenced the court politics of Ava, the capital of Burmese during the

543. S.L. Barua, A comprehensive History of Assam.
547. Gait, A History of Assam, p. 215
reign of Burmese king Bagyidaw (1819-1837), successor of Badawpaya. Her supreme and unrivalled influence in the court of Ava continued till 1835 as is clear from the account of Captain S.F. Hannay, who went to Bhamo about that time, “Bhamo is the Jaghir of the Assam Raja’s sister who is one of the ladies of the king of Ava”548.

5.1.7.10 Role of common women in politics:

It was not that only the women of the royal family participated in the politics. The common women of upright moral fiber, valour and patriotism were not rare. In the Ahom Mughal conflict in 1636-38, during the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641), not only the Assamese men but also the women-folk of Assam were interested to join the royal forces of the Ahom king to fight against the Mughal enemy. When the Ahom army, under the leadership of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, seriously defeated the Mughals in October 1638 on the bank of the Bharali, then the defeated Mughal soldiers retreated to Gauhati. According to the Buranjis, the women-folk started beating the fleeing Mughal soldiers with bamboo rods549.

During Mir Jumla’s invasion of Assam in 1662, when king Jayadhvaja Singha failed to defend his kingdom from the former, Jayadhvaja Singha made his escape first to Charaideo and then to Namrup in upper Assam, leaving the charge of the capital to Burhagohain, Bargohain and Barpatra Gohain550. On his way to Namrup, a woman of the fisherman

549. SAB, p. 28.
community met king Jayadhvaja Singha on Dalaugiri road and daringly reprimand the king saying, “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?”

During the Moamariya regime in 1769 A.D., the old king Lakshmi Singha was imprisoned and Ramakanta, son of Naharkhora Saikia, was declared king. Taking the opportunity of the dethronement of Lakshmi Singha many of the nobles and princes wanted to usurp the throne. With that view, they organized a series of intrigues called in the buranjis ‘Konwar Bidroh’. In these intrigues many of the betrayed princesses, court-ladies, wives of nobles and so also many ligiris participated with a hope of getting power and status or chance to improve their lot. The foremost among the ligiris were Bhakati, Langkoli, Rupohi, Chandmati, and Sahita etc. In the second stage of the revolution by the Maomariyas, women were also provided the art of military training by a weaver Harihar tanti on the north bank. When the insurgents defeated the royalist forces sent against them under the leadership of the latter in 1786 at the Garaimari bil and other places, the army not only contained the male soldiers but also a good number of women stalwarts who joined the force with elan.

Thus, we find that Assamese women played a very gallant

551. SAB, pp. 90, 91.
553. TB, pp. 94ff.
and significant part with great distinction in shaping the destiny of her country. They did not bind themselves in the four walls of the house but daringly came out of their limited spheres. They participated in the political field along with the men-folk by casting aside their traditional customs and native conservatism. They were successful in achieving for themselves the esteem and regard in society. They exercised their influence in the government of the country by engaging themselves in different political activities.

Part II

Economic status of women

We have already discussed that Assamese women in the ancient and medieval society were not only confined to the household chores, but also many of them contributed their large part of share in the political field. In the same way Assamese women played a vital role in socio-economic functioning of the state, which cannot be ignored in any way. They contributed in many ways to the family wealth and income by engaging themselves in different economic activities. We can observe that women contributed their economic share by doing many vital activities such as food preparation, child bearing and caring, family management, fuel and water carrying, animal rearing and a host of other activities in the house. Besides, many of them worked in the agricultural field also. It is especially more meaningful in the context of rural areas where women constituted a substantive proportion of work force either in the formal or informal sectors. But unfortunately their works were not accounted as economic share to the family or country. Therefore, it becomes very
necessary to make a comprehensive and expedient study of the contribution of women in the Assamese society. Due to the scarcity of the availability of the reliable sources it is very difficult to find the actual economic status and the economic activities of women in the ancient and medieval Assamese society. To find out the economic contribution of women, let us analyse in brief the economy of Assam in those days and the role of women in it.

5.11.1 Agriculture:

Assamese society was basically a rural and agrarian society where agriculture was the main source of livelihood for the people in general. The economy of Assam was depended mainly on agriculture and cattle rearing. Women were engaged in both the above works. From the very beginning the main work of the girls was milking the cow. Hence they were named as Duhita ———— originating from the word Go-dohan\textsuperscript{554}.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the economy of Assam till recently. More than 70% of the total population depended upon and hence engaged in agriculture for their livelihood. Both jhuming and ploughing cultivation were known, the former involving the dibbling method was popular among the hill tribes, while the latter, involving hoe and the plough was common among the plainsmen. Cultivation from the very beginning was carried on by the jhuming method, which consists in raising small embankments or terraces for preservation of water at the root of the paddy plants. First, the shrubs and jungles on the land were cleared; holes were

\textsuperscript{554} RV, VIII, 101, 15, X. 17. 40. 5.
made in the land with the help of digging sticks and then seeds were sowed without the use of hoe or plough. The use of hoes and ploughs of course marked an improved state in this method, as it is evident from the various land grants. Even now among most of the tribes, this is the main method employed in cultivation. This method is believed to have been introduced at a very early time. The Chinese traveller Hiuen-tsang informs that the country of Ka-ma-lu-po “was low and moist; the crops were regular.... there were continuous streams and tanks to the towns”\textsuperscript{555}. These prove that proper care was taken for irrigation from the ancient period, which helped in the cultivation of paddy and other agricultural products.

Rice being the staple food, the major part of the cultivated land was devoted to the cultivation of paddy. Different varieties of paddies were cultivated in ancient and medieval Assam. The YT enumerated nearly twenty varieties of rice\textsuperscript{556}. Besides rice growing, people cultivated other crops like pulses and mustard seeds\textsuperscript{557}. The cultivation of sugar canes, pumpkins and gourds in the early period was proved both by epigraphy and literature. Among the presents sent by Bhaskara to Harsa, Bana mentioned about \textit{guda} (molasses) prepared from sugarcane in the earthen pots and pumpkins and gourds, containing painting materials\textsuperscript{558}. The Bargaon grant refers to “arable land with clusters (hills) of gourds (\textit{labukutiksetra})”\textsuperscript{559}. The cultivation of various kinds of vegetables is

\textsuperscript{555} Watters, On Yuan Chwang's travels in India, ii, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{556} YT, chap. II, 5, pp. 293-298; chap II, 9, 251-253.
\textsuperscript{557} F. Hamilton, An account of Assam, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{558} P.C. Choudhury, The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 335.
\textsuperscript{559} P.C. Choudhury, The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 335.
mentioned in many works. The other green vegetables and esculents are Ada (ginger), Haladhi (turmeric), Kachu (the Arum plant), Lai, Lapha, Chuka, Maricha, Dhania, Purai, Lechera-mah, Paleng, Babari, Katari-dabua-mah, Bengena, Jika, Kerola, Kakirol, Tiah, Bangi, Dhunduli, Bhol etc.

Besides rice and other crops both literature and inscriptions proved the cultivation of different fruit trees. The epigraphs mention kantaphala (jack fruit), Amra (mango), Jambu (Eugenia jambollana), Sripahala, Dumbari (fig tree), Sakhotaka (the walnut tree), Badari (jujube tree), Lakuca or Amalaka, (a kind of bread fruit tree), Amla, Betasa (gamboze tree), Puga (betal nut), Coraka (a wild palm tree whose nuts are eaten as betel nuts), Rudraksa (bead tree) and many sour fruits, such as Au (dillenis indica) Tenteli and others. Huien Tsiang mentions that the people of Kamarupa cultivated the jackfruit and the coconut. Among the fruits, which this country produces, wrote Quazim, "are mangoes, plantains, jacks, oranges, citrons, limes, pineapples, and punialeh, a species of amleth, which has such an excellence of flavour that every person who tastes it, prefers it to the plum. There are also coconut trees, pepper-vines, areca trees and sadij (malavothrum or tezpat) in great plenty. The acid fruits of the people are Au-tenga, Amara, Jalphi, Katrina, the two kinds of Thekera, viz. Bar-Thekera and Kuji-Thekera, Kavja, Teteli, Kardai,

560. YT, 11/9/247-250.
561. W. Robinson, A descriptive account of Assam, pp. 81-83.
563. Watters, On Yuan Chwang's travels in India, II, pp. 185f.
Jara, Jeneru, Leteku, Robah-tenga etc. The cultivation of betel-nut trees along with the betel vine creeper (*Pan-gachh*) is found both in the records of the early period as well as of the medieval period. Betel nut and betel leaves were grown almost in every garden. Spices were also produced in the country. The YT and other literary works mentioned many varieties of spices. The YT mentions of plantations like *havara* (turmeric), *ardraka* (ginger), *jiraka* (cumin), *pippaliyaka* (long pepper), *marica* (pepper), *sarisa* (mustard), *karpura* and others. The same reference is found in the KP, which also mentions a large number of precious trees including *sarala, sala, candana* and *agaru*. From the above description it is clear that Assam had a rich agricultural heritage, which is of great economic value.

**5.11.2 Women as slaves and agricultural labourer:**

Agriculture being the mainstay of the people of Assam, and all the people of the state, rich or poor were directly or indirectly connected with the land in which women played a major part. Rich people did not engage themselves in the agricultural work. They employed male and female labourers for the purposes of ploughing and reaping. Both Brihaspati and Narada were unambiguous on this point. Thus Narada confirmed that among the different kinds of paid servants, the soldiers, agriculturists and porters, the agricultural labourers occupied the second rank in importance and should get one-tenth of the product of the soil in case the pay scale.

---

567. YT, II/7, 183-184; see also *Kumara-Harana*, v. 208.
568. KP, pp. 69-70
of the hired labourer had not been properly fixed. According to Brihaspati, such a labourer should receive a third or fifth part of the crops. But if a labourer would have neglected his task his payment should be stopped and he should be produced in the court and in such a case the king should impose double as much fine as the wages and pay the same as compensation to the owner of the soil.

But in case of Assam the epigraphs at our disposal hardly give us definite light on the above-discussed point, but in the Ahom period, we find that wealthy landlords hired servants for the agricultural works and also could ask insolvent borrowers to repay their debts through such services. Paramananda, a monk at Sankara’s monastery, was formerly working for others against the loan he had taken of one rupee’s worth of cowries. Another person, Balarama of Tapa, was a husbandman in others’ farms in order to repay a similar loan. A third man, Srirama, a native of the village called Simaluwa or Simaliya, was a hired hand (munis, munih, duniya, bandha) at a rich villager’s establishment. In the Ahom kingdom the nobles had a great number of slaves and retainers (bilatiya) working in their private estates, while other rich people kept such slaves if they could have afforded them. With reference to the slaves in the Ahom kingdom, Gait writes, “They were bought and sold openly, the

569. Cited in H.K. Barpujari (edt), The comprehensive history of Assam, p. 238.
570. Cited in H.K. Barpujari (edt), The comprehensive history of Assam, p. 238.
572. KGC, 101-f, p. 77.
price ranging from about twenty rupees for an adult male of good caste to three rupees for a low-caste girl\(^5\)\(^7\)\(^4\).

Though we do not get any detail about the work of the female slaves, but observing the low class female slaves and labourers in the rural society of Assam in the present days, which undoubtedly comes as a tradition from the previous days, we may infer that the girl slaves were not only engaged in the household works but were also occupied in the agricultural works during transplanting the seedlings and reaping the crops. Now a days, the proportion of women workers in Assam is higher in agriculture than in any other sectors of industry.

5.11.3 **Women in the cultivation work:**

Similarly, in the ancient and medieval Assamese society, women of the peasants and lower classes helped their husbands by engaging themselves in the cultivation work by sorting of seeds, uprooting of seedlings, transplanting, harvesting etc. The Raghuvamsa also stated that in Kamarupa the wives of cultivators watched their crops\(^5\)\(^7\)\(^5\). By sharing their husbands’ effort in cultivation works, women along with their husbands, contributed to the economic burdens of the family in their shoulders. But, women of the upper castes were not allowed to work outside the home. Therefore, they indirectly took the liability of the family economy by engaging their leisure hours in kitchen gardening contiguous to their houses where they grew different kinds of vegetables, stalks, yarns etc.


\(^5\)\(^7\)\(^5\). Raghuvamsa, ix. 20.
The YT mentioned many vegetables and other esculents, which are cultivated by the people in their kitchen garden even today. The green vegetables and other esculents mentioned in this work are *Mulaka, Rajaka, Bastuka, Palanga, Kusmanda* etc\(^{576}\). Other than kitchen gardening they give their contribution in the family economy by doing knitting, embroidery, weaving etc.

### 5.II.4 Crafts and Industries:

The craftsmen of *Kamarupa* played a great role in the development of various industries in ancient India. We find references of different professional classes in literature, foreign accounts and epigraphy. The different sources referred to weavers, spinners, goldsmiths, potters, and workers in ivory, metal, wood, cane, bamboo, etc. The ruling Kings inspired the different crafts by giving them economic help and as a result the industries of Assam gained a great reputation in the craftsmanship of other parts of contemporary Indian society\(^{577}\).

#### 5.II.4.1 Spinning and weaving:

Among the industries, spinning and weaving, were the most popular and common occupations of the people of Assam. From the very early period, spinning and weaving were entrusted to women, which could be observed from the *Vedic* simile in which night and dawn were compared to two young women engaged in weaving\(^{578}\). The words like *Siri* and

---

\(^{576}\) YT, 2/9/247-250.

\(^{577}\) P.C. Choudhury, *The history of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A D.*, p. 338.

\(^{578}\) RV, II.38 & AV, V.7.42.
Vayitri, meaning female weaver appeared in the Vedic literature\textsuperscript{579}. In the ancient and medieval Assamese society, there was a class of professional weavers known as Tantuvayas, who worked for money and had to pay a loom tax to the government\textsuperscript{580}. Besides the professional weavers, women of every Assamese family were engaged in these occupations, which is still prevalent in the rural society as a household industry. Dr. Anuva Saikia points out that in the present rural sectors of Assam, in the industry sector the percentage of females engaged in the household industry is the highest in Assam among the major states of India\textsuperscript{581}. From time immemorial, spinning of cotton and cocoons of different kinds of silk worms and also extracting fibres from certain kinds of plants and trees had been in existence.

5.11.4.2 Manufacture of Cotton garments:

In the ancient period cotton shrubs were grown for the manufacture of cotton clothes\textsuperscript{582}. The use of Karpasa (cotton) garments is also shown by the Kalika Purana\textsuperscript{583} of the 10\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. and the Harsacarita\textsuperscript{584}. Cotton was cultivated throughout the whole country. The adjacent hill tribes more extensively cultivated it; but they used it little\textsuperscript{585}. The hill tribes bartered it for other commodities with the people of the

\textsuperscript{579} N.C. Banerjee, Economic life and progress in ancient India, vol. 1, pp. 139-140.
\textsuperscript{580} Sri Sankardeva aru Sri Madhavdeva Charita of Daityari Thakur 1251ff. cited in M. Neog, Early History of the Vaisnava faith and movement in Assam, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{581} "Dr. Anuva Saikia, Economic status of women in the rural areas of Assam" in S.L. Baruah, edt. Status of women in Assam, pp.22-33.
\textsuperscript{582} The history of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 339.
\textsuperscript{583} Chap. 69, v..2.; 68/12. also (section 1).
\textsuperscript{584} H. C. Cowell, Harsacarita, pp. 212f.
\textsuperscript{585} F. B. Hamilton, An Account of Assam, p. 59; W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, p. 226.
plains who spinned threads out of it. The tribes, who cultivated cotton most, were the Garos, the Nagas and the Mikirs\(^586\). The cotton cloths of Assam were very famous due to its excellency in the art of manufacture and so it was in great demand in and outside the region\(^587\). Other than cotton clothes, the KP mentioned about the woolen garments (Kambala), bark cloths (valka), silk (kosaja) and hemp cloths (sanavastram)\(^588\). Bark cloths were made of fibres of trees and plants. The process was widely prevalent among most of the tribes of Assam. The hill tribes were expert in spinning or preparing threads from the fibres of the barks of the plants. Even in the present days, most the tribals were found to manufacture excellent fabrics of various designs through this process\(^589\). An early reference to a variety of bark cloth known as srnkhala cloths worn by the Kiratas, forming the army of Bhagadatta is mentioned in the Mhb\(^590\).

**5.11.4.3 Manufacture of Silk clothes:**

Other than cotton clothes, Assam was very popular for the manufacture of silk clothes in all over the country. The Assamese knew the art of sericulture and the process of rearing cocoons for the manufacture of various silk cloths as early as the Ramayana and the Arthasastra. The former mentioned in one passage about Magadha, Anga, Pundra and the "country of the cocoon-rearers", (kosa-karanam bhumih)\(^591\). This "country

---

588. Chap. 69, v. 2, 68/12.
589. Hutton, Angami Nagas, pp. 60f, 72f; Playfair, The Garos, pp. 33f; 45, 56f; Robinson, Account of Assam, pp. 415f.
590. Mhb, Sabha Parvan.
591. Ramayana, Kiskindhyakanda, 40.
of the cocoon rearers" is believed to be Kamarupa lying to the east of Pundra by the historians of the early period. The varieties of silk cloths are mentioned in the Arthasastra, which make an important reference to ksauma, dukula and patrorna fabrics from Suvarnakundya and other places in Kamarupa. Historians are of the opinion that this Suvarnakundya is the modern Sonkudiha in the district of Kamrup. The evidence from Arthasastra is also confirmed by Harsacarita, which gives valuable evidence on the industrial resources of Assam during the time of Bhaskara. The presents sent to Harsha by Bhaskaravarman, were "silken cloths (Ksaumani), pure as the moon's light", "abhoga umbrella wrapped in dukula cloth" and a "variety of silken objects woven out of pattasutra". Dukula is also referred to in the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala.

Assam enjoyed a reputation from remote antiquity for producing silk of a high degree of perfection. The Classical writers, beginning at least with the 1st century A.D., made important mention of the production of silk and the silk trade in and through Assam. The Periplus referred to both raw and manufactured silk, which were brought from China or Assam. Pliny showed some knowledge of the silk trade that was carried on through Assam. The antiquity of the silk industry in India is uncertain, but Schoff observed, "The weight of evidence seems to be in favour of its importation from China by way of the Brahmaputra valley, Assam.

594. S. Rajguru, Medieval Assamese Society, p. 293.
595. H.C. Cowell, Harsacarita, pp. 212f.
596. Plate ii, L. 38.
Eastern Bengal, early in the Christian era\(^5\). Hodson states that silk insects were originated in Manipur wherefrom it went to China\(^6\). The Mohammedan writers also noticed the excellent quality of silk. Quazim wrote that the silk of Assam was very excellent, resembling that of China\(^7\). Tavernier remarked that the silk of Assam was produced on trees and the stuffs made of them were very brilliant\(^8\).

The different varieties of silk, especially associated with Assam are known as *pat* (patta), *edi* (attacus ricini) made from the silk of the worm of the same name; and *muga* (antheroea Assamoea) from a cocoon of the same name. The terms *pat* and *edi* are derived from the Sanskrit words, *pattaja* and *erandi* but there is no Sanskrit equivalent for *muga*, which seems to indicate that *muga* was an exclusively indigenous product of Assam\(^9\). The Latin name of *Muga* also indicated that it is chiefly associated with Assam, though perhaps a small quantity is produced in Dehra Dun\(^10\). The rearing of *edi* cocoons takes a long time before they provide silk which is fit for spinning. The cocoons are fed as the name indicates, on castor plants\(^11\). The *edi* cloths are usually white with a yellowish tinge, smooth as well as rough and very warm, used during

---

599. Schott, Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, p. 264.
winter\textsuperscript{606}. The \textit{muga} has many varieties like the \textit{campa}, the cocoons of which are fed on the \textit{campa} tree (\textit{michelia champaka}) and the \textit{mejanhari} or \textit{adakari}, feeding on the plants of the same name\textsuperscript{607}. The \textit{muga} cloths are usually yellowish with the tinge of gold and are often dyed red with \textit{lac}\textsuperscript{608}. The \textit{pat} silk is the product of \textit{bombyx textor} and \textit{bombyx croesi}, the cocoons of which are fed on the mulberry trees. Of all the silk cloths, the \textit{pat} fibres are the smoothest and the finest, with a mixture of white and yellowish tinge. The evidence from the \textit{Arthasastra}, the \textit{Harsacarita} and the classical writers among others proved that in the art of the rearing of silk cocoons and the weaving of the finest silk textiles, the weavers of \textit{Kamarupa} had a reputation equal to those of China. The tradition has been continued to the present times\textsuperscript{609}.

All the above descriptions prove that whether in the art of weaving or in the rearing of silkworms and the manufacture of fine garments, both in cotton and silk, Assam had a great deal of contribution. It is likely that the pre-Aryans, the Bodos and the allied tribes introduced the art of sericulture and weaving into Assam at an early period. But a new epoch began with the arrival of the Ahoms since they knew this art from very early times\textsuperscript{610}, and in course of time it acquired a national status

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{606} Stack, Silk in Assam (Notes on some Industries of Assam. 1884-95), cited in P.C. Choudhury, The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 341; Watt, Commercial products, pp. 1012f.
\item \textsuperscript{607} Stack, Silk in Assam, pp. 13-21, cited in P.C. Choudhury, The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 341.
\item \textsuperscript{608} F. Hamilton, Account of Assam, pp. 61-62.
\item \textsuperscript{609} Hamilton, An account of Assam, pp. 61-62, Watt, Commercial products, pp. 1009ff.
\item \textsuperscript{610} There is a reference in the Ahom Buranji (p. 5) that Ja-Shing-Pha used to wind "hei thread with 300 female attendants".
\end{itemize}
so much so that every Ahom woman was expected to be proficient in weaving irrespective of her birth and rank.

5.II.4.4 Contribution of Assamese women in the spinning and weaving industry:

Assamese women contributed a large part of share in the field of spinning and weaving in the form of handloom industry. This industry had always been given importance by the Ahom kings. In the Ahom period the professional weavers known as Tantis, occupied important place in the society. The reputed weavers were even employed in the Ahom court for the supply of the royal robes to the Ahom kings and the royal family. In his monograph on cotton fabric of Assam, H.F. Samman says, “The Ahom Rajas kept skilful weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with cloths and it is related how in the reign of Purandar Rajah, one Madhuram Tani excelled all other weavers of the day and was for his services to the royal family, granted rent free land by the king”611. Besides professional weavers, the handloom industry occupied a significant place in every Assamese household especially among women. Now a days many women had taken the handloom industry as their profession.

In the Ahom period, spinning and weaving were not just a hobby for the females but it was made compulsory for every woman by the royal court during the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641). The advantage of this compulsion was observed in the near future. By

this art the females of the region were able to become self-dependent in the worse situation. They could even share the economic responsibility of the family. Even they contributed their duty towards the country by this art by donating some parts of the home spun yarns regularly to the royal court. The credit goes to Momai Tamuli; the Barboroolah of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641), for moulding weaving habit of Assamese women into professional form and consequently it became a source of livelihood for many Assamese women. When the region was facing a severe political, social and economic crisis due to the continuous Mohammedan attacks, Momai Tamuli Barboroolah was given the responsibility by the Ahom king Pratap Singha to re-organize and improve the domestic, communal and social life of the people of Assam. After touring round the whole region, he observed that each and every people, be it man or woman, be it rich or poor, contributed some part of their duty towards the country to improve the worse situation of the region. Therefore, he promulgated an order that every man should weave a basket or a sieve and every capable woman in the state had to spin at least two cops of yarn every evening and it was obligatory for every Assamese household to contribute to the royal court one seer of homespun silk annually.

Various examples can be cited to prove that the women of Assam of all status and position were proficient in the art of spinning and weaving. Even queens and ladies of high birth considered these parts of their household duties. To supervise the duties of every man and woman.

one officer was appointed in each village and anybody found neglecting his or her works without any reasonable cause, was punished. The women were also appointed to supervise the looms in the royal harem. The KGC records that the mother of one Bhavanipurta Gopal Ata, was an expert weaver, and was entrusted with the charge of superintending the twelve score of looms that were in the royal harem during the reign of the Ahom king Suhungmung, alias Dihingia Raja. Some queens also took keen interest in training the girls as well as looking after the activities of the looms, which were in the royal palace campus. Queen Sarveswari, consort of King Siva Singha started a school in the palace campus, where under her own supervision the young girls of different communities were taught the art of spinning, weaving and singing and dancing, batch by batch. The Govt. appointed some persons to supply raw materials for the looms of the prominent queens of the Ahom kings. The Raidangia Phukan and the Raidangia Barua were under the Raidangia queen to manage her estate as well as to see the activities of the paiks who were in charge of supplying yearns and other raw materials for the looms of the queen and in the same way, under the Parbatia queen, there were the officers known as Parbatia Phukan and Parbatia Barua for such works. Further, there were higher officers appointed by the state to supervise the activities of these people. Francis Hamilton remarks, "The native women of all castes from the queen downward, weave four kinds of silk that are produced in the country, and with which three-fourths of the people are clothed.

613. B. Sharma, Durbin, p. 10.
614. KGC, p. 261.
615. Dr, S.K. Bhuyan, Buranjir Bani, 1956, p. 28.
Considerable quantities of the two coarser kinds are exported. There may be one loom for every two women; and in great families there are eight or ten, which are wrought by slave girls. The raw materials is seldom purchased; each family spins and weaves the silk which it rears, and petty dealers go round and purchase for ready money whatever can be spared for exportation or for the use of the few persons who rear none of their own.\textsuperscript{617}

It was customary on the part of an Assamese wife in those days to equip her warrior husband with a garment whenever he proceeded to the battlefield to fight against the enemy. This garment was called \textit{ranua kapor} or \textit{kavach kapor} because it was the belief of the people that if a soldier went to the battlefield with such a cloth presented by his wife, he would not meet any reverse situation in the battlefield and the thread of this garment must be spun and weaved within the course of one single night.\textsuperscript{618} This cloth served as protective armour against death in the battlefield and that was why it was called \textit{Kavach-Kapor} (\textit{Kavach} = armour, \textit{Kapor} = cloth). No woman was allowed to make this cloth while she was in her menstruation or in other impurities. History narrates that the great Ahom general Phrasengmung \textit{Bargohain} died in the battlefield as he went there without being equipped with this protective garment. The power of this protective garment is explained by S.K. Bhuyan, “It is quite plausible that the presence of this cloth, in the person of the soldiers, a handiwork of their wives and sisters, sharpened the blades in their hands and served

\textsuperscript{617} F. Hamilton, \textit{An account of Assam}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{618} PAB, pp. 59-60.
as the voice of duty heard amidst the crack of drums and the splintering of spear-shafts. The literary records and the marriage songs revealed that the threads they spun were so fine and smooth that the clothes, which were made of these threads were so light and soft that could be easily concealed within the grip of the hand and could be dried without sunshine.

Expertise in the art of weaving and spinning has always been held to be one of the highest abilities of an Assamese woman. Dr. S.K. Bhuyan commented about the proficiency of weaving and spinning of an Assamese woman by saying, “Every Assamese woman, be she a daughter of a Brahman or a Sudra, a Buddhist or an animist, a Mohammedan or a Christian, a prince or a beggar, is a weaver by birth.” Knowledge of weaving was an essential qualification for her in those days to get a ready disposal in the matrimonial market. During a proposal of marriage, the first question asked about the bride was whether she knew bowakata, i.e., whether she was skilled in spinning and weaving. Her other qualities became fruitless if she did not know weaving. She had to face shameless remarks from the society if she would have worn cloths woven by others. An Assamese woman, in however destitute condition she might be, did not have to face economic crisis due to her weaving qualification. She not only earned her own bread and butter but was also used to borne a large financial burden of her family. The universal practice of weaving by every Assamese woman led the great Bengali preacher and

scholar Pundit Sivanath Sastri to remark during his visit to Assam in the last century that it was only in Assam that he found justifications for the alleged derivation of word wife from weave.

5.II.5 Embroidery:

Apart from weaving, Assamese women also make embroidery on the cloth to give a good look. Women of this region knew embroidery from the very early period. The Rukminiharan kavya discussed about the Sari worn by Behula during her dance performance in heaven in the assembly of Gods. The Sari was decently embroidered with all the incarnating figures of Lord Krisna. The embroidery work was done by either coloured threads, or Muga or Gold or silver threads. H.F. Samman in his monograph informs us that, in the Ahom period there were separate artists known as Gunakatia using gold and silver strings for embroidery. According to Hamilton, the mosquito curtains were also beautifully embroidered. Quazim writes that Assamese people are expert in weaving velvet cloths and embroidery works.

Therefore, it is clear from the above discussion that Assamese women, besides doing their regular household duties, took part in different economic activities and share with their male counterparts, the family's economic burden on their shoulders. Besides achieving economic power

626. P. C. Choudhury, The History of Civilization of the people of Assam, pp. 364, 368
through economic activities, let us find out whether they had any economic rights according to the laws of inheritance.

5.11.6 Proprietary Rights of Women:

We have already discussed in the previous chapter that in the Vedic ages, woman was given a high and respectable position in certain spheres like education and religious matters. She was given the status equal to man. But in the matter of law of succession, she did not have any formal property rights. In ancient India, woman was not considered to be a legal person and therefore she was thought to be incapable of inheriting any property. She was treated as a perpetual minor, over whom man was always entitled to exercise control. According to Manu, a wife, a son and a slave – these three are declared to have no property; the wealth they earn is acquired for him to whom they belong\footnote{Manu, VIII – 416.}. But this does not mean that a woman was left unprotected in economic matters. She had limited rights over the property of her husband as a wife and also inherited the property of her father as a daughter under certain conditions. Let us discuss the rights of woman as wife, as widow, as daughter and as mother.

5.11.6.1 Rights of the wife:

In the Vedic society, the husband and wife were regarded as joint owners of the household. The husband was required to take somber oath at the time of the marriage that he would never misappropriate the
rights and interests of his wife in economic matters\textsuperscript{628}. But the joint
ownership did not mean that the wife had absolute equality with her
husband in the ownership of the family property. It only indicated restricted
ownership over her husband’s property. According to Apastamba, the theory
of joint ownership meant that in the absence of her husband, the wife
was permitted to acquire the normal expenditure on household affairs\textsuperscript{629}.
She could enjoy the property of her husband lifelong but did not have
the right to donate or vend it. According to Katyayana (Dayabhaga, X–
1–56)\textsuperscript{630}, if the childless widow remains unblemished in her character and
devoted towards her dead husband, she could enjoy the property of her
ex-husband until her death. But she did not have the right to provide gift
or sell the property according to her own wish. The Mitakshara expressly
declared that she could spend from the family property only with the
concurrence of the husband\textsuperscript{631}. The only right she got was the right to
get maintenance from her husband. Altekar expresses that the ancient Hindu
legislators were unable to protect the wife’s right of maintenance or a share;
she could not invalidate a sale or a mortgage of the family property by
the husband, if it was detrimental even to her right of maintenance\textsuperscript{632}. Thus,
the theory of joint ownership of the husband and the wife practically
remained a legal fiction. In effect the husband was the solitary owner of
the family property and the wife had no lawful remedy, even if he proceeded
to squander it and defeat her right to maintenance or a share. The joint

\textsuperscript{628} RV, X. 85.8.
\textsuperscript{629} ADS, II, 6.14.9.
\textsuperscript{630} Indra, The status of women in ancient India, p. 158.
\textsuperscript{631} Altekar, The position of women in Hindu civilization, p. 216.
\textsuperscript{632} Altekar, The position of women in Hindu civilization, p. 216.
ownership theory helped the wife only in securing a number of certain minor rights and privileges.

The joint ownership helped the wife in gaining an absolute right of maintenance against husband. According to one of the verses of Manu, the husband was bound to maintain the wife, even if there were no family property. Vasistha stated that even the husband without making adequate arrangement for his wife's maintenance and for the household expenditure could not go on a journey. If he would have married for the second time, he had to provide maintenance expenditure to his first wife. If the wife was assaulted, it was the responsibility of the husband to protect and maintain her. The husband was bound to give maintenance to such wife also, who was indulged in some immorality or became unchaste or turned an outcaste. If the wife was unjustly superseded then the husband was compelled to pay one-third part of his wealth to the superseded wife. Jurists like Vijnanesvara maintained that if a husband abandoned a virtuous wife, or willfully misappropriated her property and refused to restore it, she could take the help of court of law to get justice. In the matter of partition, however the Mitakshara-law allowed a wife to get an equal share with her own son or sons when the division is made in the lifetime of her husband. In case she had Stridhana from her father-in-law in her possession, then she was also entitled to half the share.

634. VDS, 28.2, ff.
635. Manu, XI, 176–77, 188.
636. Yajnavalkya, 1-76.
638. Indra, The status of women in ancient India, pp. 167-68.
5.11.6.2 *Stridhana*:

*Stridhana* was the term used to denote property over which a woman could exercise absolute control. *Stridhana* might be acquired by a woman through inheritance or partition or in the form of gift from her parents, husband or relatives. Henry Maine describes *Stridhana* as: “The settled property of a married woman incapable of alienation by her husband is well-known to the Hindus under the name of *stridhana*. It is certainly a remarkable thing that this institution seems to have developed among the Hindus at a period relatively much earlier than among the Romans”639.

*Stridhana* originated through the custom of the bride-price640 obtained by the bride’s father from the groom, when the marriage was performed according to *Asura* or *Gandharva* or *Rakshasha* or *Paishacha* forms. It was generally found that parents of the bride used to return a part or sometimes even the whole of the bride price to the bride, which became her separate property. She had full liberty to spend it during her lifetime. After her death, this property went to her children, but if she died childless the property went to her parents or their next of kin641. From this it is clear that one of the ingredients of *stridhana* consisted of the portion of the bride price, which was gifted to the bride by her father.

If the marriage was performed according to *Brahma* or *Daiva* or *Arsha* or *Prajapaty* forms, no bride price was given. In that case, the

---

639. H. Maine, Early History of Institutions, p. 231.
640. Dr. Savita Visnoi, Economic status of women in ancient India, ibid, p. 16.
*stridhana* consisted of the wedding gifts received by the bride. In the *Vedic* age, these gifts were termed as *parinahya* and wife was the owner of these gifts\(^642\). According to Vasistha, *parinahya* or the nuptial presents constituted *stridhana*\(^643\). Therefore, according to the ancient law, the term *stridhana* was used for the gifts and presents received by a woman from others. Ancient jurists like Gautama, Apastamba, Narada, Vishnu, Vyasa and Devala, acknowledged the right of women for owning separate property. Devala\(^644\) stated that food and vesture, ornaments, perquisites and wealth received by a woman from a kinsman were her own properties; she might enjoy it herself and her husband had no right over it. If he gave it away on a false consideration or consumed it, he had to repay the value of the *stridhana* to the woman with interest. Gradually, the scope of *stridhana* was enlarged. It included the gifts given by the husband subsequent to the marriage. These were often expensive and would sometimes include even the entire property of the husband. In Br.Up, Yajnavalkya is said to have divided his whole property equally between his two wives at the time of his impending retirement\(^645\). In another similar incident, the husband of Dharmadanna informed her that she could take away as much of his property as she liked, and retire to her parents' house\(^646\).

The *Vedic* literature is silent about the precise scope of *stridhana*. The idea of its scope was found from the *Dharmasastra* works.

---

642. Dr. Savita Visnoi, *Economic status of women in ancient India*, p. 16.
643. VDS, XVII.46.
645. Br. Up, 2.4.3.
Manu is the earliest writer to give a comprehensive description of stridhana. According to him it consisted of six varieties: 1) Gifts given by the father, 2) Gifts given by the mother, 3) Gifts given by the brother, 4) the gift or property, which was acquired by her from her husband, subsequent to the marriage, 5) Presents given by anybody at the time of marriage, 6) Gifts received by the bride on the bridal procession. Gifts under most of these categories would consist usually of ornaments and costly apparel, and Manu is very vehement in denouncing those who would deprive women of these presents after their husbands' death. Vishnu adds three more categories to stridhana: 1) Gifts given by the son, 2) Gifts given by any other relation, and 3) the compensation given to the wife at the time of her supersession on the occasion of her husband's second marriage. Apparently it can be concluded from the above descriptions of stridhana as we find in majority of the ancient Hindu Dharmasastras that it mainly consisted of gifts provided by relatives, either at the time of the marriage or subsequent to it.

5.11.6.3 Right of woman over her Stridhana:

The Vedic literature did not mention about the extent of legal right of woman over her stridhana. Early Smriti writers did not accept woman as a legal person and therefore they were not ready to invest full powers to the latter over her stridhana. Manu for instance declared that a wife should never make any expenditure out of the family property.

---

647. Manu, IX. 194.
648. Manu, III, 52.
belonging to several or even out of her own stridhana without her husband’s sanction\textsuperscript{650}. But Katyayana hold that women possessed the power of sale and mortgage even over her immovable property included in their stridhana\textsuperscript{651}. Narada differed from him and declared that women could dispose of only the movables in their stridhana\textsuperscript{652}.

There were certain rules regarding the husband’s right over stridhana. Manu strictly expressed that a husband could not deprive the wife of her stridhana, although so many restrictions were put on its free use. Manu said that a husband could temporarily take his wife’s stridhana, if she was inimical to him\textsuperscript{653}. However, he did not mention anything regarding the use of wife’s property by a husband in times of need. He further stated that her other relatives had no right to use her stridhana, no matter how direly they needed it. They were to be punished like thieves if they used it\textsuperscript{654}. He further remarked, “Those relations who live on the property of women commit sin and sink into hell”\textsuperscript{655}. They are to be treated as outcastes, if they divided the ornaments of a widow, which she wore during her husband’s lifetime\textsuperscript{656}.

About the right of husband to use the stridhana, Kautilya mentioned that, “In calamities such as disease and famine, in warding off danger and in charitable acts, the husband too may make use of this property. Neither shall there be any complaint against the enjoyment of

\textsuperscript{650} Manu IX, 199.
\textsuperscript{651} Altekar, The position of women in Hindu civilization, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{652} Altekar, The position of women in Hindu civilization, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{653} Manu, IX, 77.
\textsuperscript{654} Manu, IX, 77.
\textsuperscript{655} Manu, III, 52.
\textsuperscript{656} Manu, IX, 200.
this property if it is by mutual consent nor shall there be any complaint if this property has been enjoyed by those who are wedded in accordance with the custom of the first four kinds of marriage. But the property enjoyed by the husband in the cases of the *Gandharva* and the *Asura* forms of marriages, shall be restored otherwise the use of this property by the husband shall be dealt with as a case of theft"657.

Though the *Vedas* did not permit the widow to inherit the property of her husband, but at the same time, it gave woman the right of inheritance to her father's property658.

---

658. RV, II–2–7