CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSION

On the foregoing chapters an attempt has been made to depict the status and position of women and also analyze their role and contributions in society, politics, economy, religion and culture have been analyzed on the basis of available primary and secondary sources in the course of long history of Assam from mythological period to Ahom period (1826). But the main problem faced by us is that the sources available were very scanty. The mythological books such as Ramayana, Mhb and Puranas mainly deal with the political and religious conditions of the period. We do not get any clear vision of the position of women from these sources. Some of the pictures of women mentioned were connected with the royal families of those periods. Even the stories related with these women cannot be totally relied because they are very confusing and perplexing. Secondly, these stories do not focus on the conditions of common women. Similarly, the sources of ancient Assam i.e., the inscriptions compare the queens and wives of the Brahmana donees with the different goddesses but neither they produce any clear picture of the social, political, religious or economic position of royal women, nor do they reveal the position of common women. Of course, the Buranjis, which are the sources of medieval Assam, give the portrait of many women, who rendered their valuable share in
political, religious and cultural fields as well as in society. Their contribution in family and household have also been assessed.

It is clear that within this long period, the position of women has undergone many changes, but if we compare the position of Assamese women with those of women of other parts of India, we find that women of Assam enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in the spheres of family, religion and public life. After assessing the roles and contributions of women in all spheres of life, we come to the conclusion that women no doubt were essential parts of Assamese civilization and their contributions were very important in the formation of the history of Assam. Assam was rich in its cultural heritage. The composite and pluralistic culture of Assam influenced the position of women. Every time an ethnic race, when joined the Assamese culture, brought with it own traditions, values and customs. Therefore, the rigid and evil customs of any race could not imprint its footprints permanently in the complex Assamese culture. So the Assamese culture was found to be liberal in all the matters such as caste system, religion, society etc. that obviously had an impact on the position of women.

The literary sources clearly indicated that from the mythological period, women of Assam were very famous for their splendid beauty and that is why, in spite of lack of suitable communication facilities, the princes from different parts of the country dared to drop their footholds to Assam to take part in the swayambara sabha in the hope of getting their life partners from this region. We have seen that wives of this region were respectful, honest, virtuous, self-sacrificing and dedicated towards their
husbands. This was indicated several times in the mythological literature. When Rama was put to exile for fourteen years, Sita followed the footsteps of her husband leaving aside all the comforts of palace. Similarly Damayanti escorted her husband Nala when he unfortunately lost all his wealth in the game of dice. But on the other hand, we find that there was no such hard and fast rule for the husbands to be loyal towards their wives, because polygamy was the general rule of the society, which was very common for the male members of the royal family. The kings had their own harems, where the concubines were used to stay to entertain the kings and other royal male members.

In the Vedic age, women enjoyed equal opportunity, equal right in every sphere of life as that of men. The Vedic Samhitas described wife as ardhangini or paini without whom no ceremony could be performed. The evil custom like Sati, Purdah and Child marriage were unknown in the Vedic age. The Widow remarriage was allowed in society. Her position in the household was quite important and she was considered the prime authority in every decision making process of the household. But after the Vedic age, due to the introduction of the evil customs of Sati, child marriage and purdah system, women lost their dignity outside the household matters. But on contrary to that, we find that the position of Assamese women were not affected so much after the Vedic period and they could sustain their dignity and respect in the society even after the Vedic period and could enjoy a fair degree of freedom in society.

Due to the rich, pluralistic and composite culture that was...
prevalent in Assam, the evil customs of Aryan culture could not execute its rigidity in this region till 1826. Other than one or two cases, we fail to find any evidence of Sati in the Assamese society. Women, who placed themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands never faced any outward force from the society, but they did so on their own wishes to show their dedication towards their husbands. Similarly, the evil customs of Purdah, which was very common in the medieval period in other parts of India, never existed in ancient and medieval Assam. From the Tezpur grant it is clear that women could take their bath in the open. Except among the Brahmins and Kayasthas, child marriage was found to be rare among other classes. Widow re-marriage was prevalent in the society, though it was not so common among the upper castes of the society. The practice of dowry that was largely practiced in the Hindu society in other parts in ancient and medieval India was not at all existent in the traditional Assamese society. But one evil custom that was widely prevalent in the mythological and medieval Assamese society was Polygamy. Almost all the kings had more than one wife, which surely deteriorated to certain extent the position of women in the society. Whether polygamy was prevalent among general people or not, are not known with certainty.

Marriage was one of the sacred institutions of the Assamese Hindu society. The marriage ceremony usually lasted for three to four days that followed a blend of local and Vedic customs. The remarkable feature of the system was the singing of marriage songs, which constituted an important element of Assamese folk poetry.

Chastity and devotedness to her husband have been considered as two great ornaments of a woman's character. In the medieval period, the chastity of a lower caste lady namely Radhika Sati was greatly appreciated by Sri Sankardeva. The happiness of domestic life greatly depended upon woman. Her role became more important when she became a mother because the future of children depended much upon her quality and education. In the Assamese society, mother was given the highest honour in the society, which is reflected in the inscriptions of ancient Assam, where mothers of the kings were compared to mother goddesses. Even some of the queens got the status of goddesses in the eye of their king husbands and also in the minds of the people of the kingdom.

Though the inscriptions does not focus towards the status of common women but the Buranjis and Biographies of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, which deal mainly with the Ahom period refers to women belonging to the common class. We come to know from these sources that women's roles were not only confined to the household duties, but they boldly came out of their restricted area and proved their ability in the field of economy, politics and religion along with the men-folk by casting aside their traditional customs and native conservatism.

We find that in the agrarian society of Assam, women played very significant role in the economy of the region. Women of the lower strata of the society belonging to lower income group shared the financial burden with their husbands to run the household smoothly. They contributed in several ways to increase their family income by engaging themselves
in the agricultural activities such as sorting of seeds, uprooting of seedlings, transplanting, harvesting etc. Women belonging to the upper class society were not allowed to work in the agricultural field but they helped their husbands to maintain the family budget by growing vegetables, stalks, yarns etc. in the kitchen garden.

Besides agricultural works, Assamese women provided valuable economic contribution in the field of crafts and industries also. Among these, most important were spinning and weaving, which have presently taken the form of handloom industry. Women of all classes were very proficient in the art of spinning and weaving. In fact, this art was in the blood of every Assamese women in the ancient and medieval period. Dr. S.K. Bhuyan commented about the proficiency of weaving and spinning of an Assamese woman by saying that “Every Assamese woman, be she the 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.” Gandhi in his journal “young India” wrote, “The Assamese women weave fairy tales in cloth. Every women in Assam is by nature an artist.”

The role played by Assamese women in the political field is no less significant. Though the number of such women is few, but their contributions were very significant. They were successful in achieving for themselves the esteem and regard in society. The influence, which they exercised in the government of the country by their different political

activities is worth-mentioning. Some of the Ahom kings married women from general people such as King Siva Singha married the Nati sisters namely Phuleswari and Sarbeswari respectively. These two sisters ruled the kingdom as ‘Bar Raja’ and engaged themselves in some social welfare works like erecting temples and tanks. In ancient period, we get mention of one Nari Rajya, about which the details have been discussed in my thesis. This Nari Rajya was ruled by women rulers with the help of women ministers.

There were instances of such women also, who were not ruler of the country, but their influence was found to be very large in the matter of state affairs. Women in this period were very daring. They had the guts even to show the mistake of kings. One such lady was Nangbakla Gabharu. Some women such as Mula Gabharu, Radha and Rukmini showed their immense courage in the battlefield. Women sacrificed their precious lives for the welfare of their motherland. They also exhibited their diplomacy many times in the politics from even behind the curtain. Even the Assamese women, who were married off to the kings of the distant lands showed their influence in the court of their king husbands.

In the religious field, we find that mother goddess occupied a dominant place in the ancient and medieval Assamese society, which indicates towards the female dominance at that period. Though Assamese Hindu society was male dominated, but some of the tribal societies were female dominated. The tribal society had considerable influence on Assamese Hindu society. The different inscriptions of ancient Assam
compare the queens with the different Goddesses, which indicates that queens were considered to bring the prosperity and goodness by their fortune. Women were given full religious independence to worship and have faith in any religion. In the Ahom period, we find that some women were honoured by the society by accepting them as religious heads of the respective sects. This also points out that women were educated otherwise they could not be appointed as medhis or heads of the religious institutions.

Upper class of women were mostly educated. Many queens along with their king husbands of the Koch and Ahom kingdom were found to be patronizing many scholars to create their literature. Queen Phuleswari established a Pathsala at the palace campus where education was mainly imparted in Sanskrit. Women were found to take keen interest in education due to the influence of Sankardeva, who inspired women to be educated so to read the holy books of the Vaisnava religion. The Vaisnavite movement also endowed the culture of music and dancing with new vigour and spirit in order to spread Vaisnavism in the different satras of the province. As a result of the Vaisnavite movement almost every woman acquired sort of efficiency in the art of singing celestial songs called Bargit, Bhatima, Totai etc.

We have already mentioned that due to the influence of Mongoloid culture, Assamese women did not had to face those rigid social customs and taboos, which women in other parts of the country had to face. This had given the Assamese women a better position in comparison

to her sisters in rest of the India. But this does not mean that they got the position equal to their male counterparts. They too had to suffer from the crippling effects of lack of educational facilities, economic independence and want of personal freedom.

In spite of giving their precious contributions in different fields, women could not attain a very good status, which they deserved. She was not given the equal proprietary rights neither in her father's property, nor in her husband's property in the ancient and medieval Assamese society. Though husband and wife were regarded as joint owners of the household, but we do not come across any instance, where wife's proprietary rights were separately recognized, as is the case in the modern age. She only got rights over her Stridhana, which she used to get from her parents and relatives.

In the religious field, we find examples of women as religious heads and medhis, but surprisingly we do not get any instance of female priestesses. It might be for the reason that women were considered to be impure and that is why, some of the Satras did not allow women to enter into their Namghars. Sankardeva, who was sometimes regarded as comparatively liberal in his attitude towards women, was not free from such influences. He refused to initiate the women, as they were liars, sinners, unchaste and too much attached to wealth and property\textsuperscript{1100}. He stated that company of women could hallucinate the mind of any saint.

\textsuperscript{1100} KGC, p. 221.
person also and destroy all sorts of penances, sacrifices and devotions. So the devoted persons should avoid women’s association.1101

According to proverbial sayings still prevalent in the society, the women should not be believed in secret matters and the revelation of secret affairs to women is prohibited1102. In the household and family life, in which women’s place were considered to be dominating, but in fact in this sphere also they were kept under the subjugation of the males. Like all other patriarchal society; in the Assamese Hindu society too, the birth of a daughter was unwelcome for the parents. In the important household matters or in the matter of marriage of their own or their children, their suggestions were taken, but the ultimate decisions were made by men. The male dominated society not only neglected their valuable contributions but insulted them by using the words like sinners, immoral, greedy, deceitful, unchaste etc. There were advocates of celibacy in the Vaisnava cult who compared the married life to that of a pig’s life and the women as being doors to hell1103. On one of its account, KGC records that a wife remains honest and devoted towards her husband, as long husband could fulfill her wishes, but when husband becomes incapable to fulfill her desires, she start showing her disregard and dishonesty towards her husband and sometimes she even degrade to such a extent that the position of husband becomes vulnerable1104. Another author Ram Charan

Thakur in his *Guru Charit* asserts that women are most irreligious and sinful; they know nothing than untruth and are addicted to constant sexual pleasure\(^{1105}\). On the other hand, morality, truthfulness was not necessary for men and they were allowed for polygamy making the wife's position more deteriorated.

But the position of women is quite different in the tribal societies of Assam. We have found that in general, women in tribal societies enjoy a higher status than their non-tribal counterparts or even than their own men folk mainly because of the leading role they play in production. Some of the tribes like Garo, Khasi and some of the Dimasas follow the female line of descent. Therefore, the birth of girl child is very important in these societies. Even in the Patriarchal tribal societies, girl child is never neglected because she is considered as an economic asset for her parents. She not only serves the family by doing the household jobs, but also constitutes the major toil in cultivation works, which is the primary resource of subsistence in the tribal society. Besides, parents of the girls get a substantial amount as bride price during her marriage in most of the patriarchal tribal societies.

Bride price undoubtedly signifies the higher status and position of tribal women. But along with this, we have found that the right of inheritance in the patriarchal tribal societies was on the side of man, so, like Assamese Hindu society, woman here also was considered as inferior to, dependent on, and under subjugation of man. Before her

marriage, she was supposed to be under the subjugation of her father, under her husband after the marriage and under her son in the absence of husband. Since all the tribal societies are completely based on agriculture, where the woman is bound to share the equal amount of exertion in the cultivation works besides doing the household duties, but unfortunately, she is not given equal status in comparison to the other sex in the family and society. Though she is given a honourable position in the family and she can enjoy great authority within the domestic sphere but decision-making and exercise of authority in serious matters of family are vested with man.

One thing is very surprising that when in the patrilineal societies, women are subordinate to male persons then naturally in the matrilineal society, the domination of women should be supreme. But some of the customs do not permit women to hold the supreme position in the society. It is interesting to note that in the matriarchal societies also, though the property belongs to the mother and inheritance is passed from mother to daughter but the actual guardianship is transferred from father to the son-in-law and after the death of the father, the son-in-law takes the full authority in his new house. The wife remains subordinate to her husband in spite of her staying in matrilocal residence and inheritance of the paternal property. Gassah after observing the daily life of the Garos comments that “The husband is first served by his wife. According to the Garo custom, the husband can beat his wife, if found unreasonable whereas the wife could not beat her husband under any circumstances”1106. Moreover, most

of the tribal societies permitted the males to go for polygamy, which can be seen even in the recent days also.

Therefore, it is clear that the matrilineal society cannot be termed in real sense as female dominated society. However, if we compare the matriarchal societies with the patriarchal societies, then we can say that the position of women is much better in matriarchal societies because the paternal property is inherited by women. But one thing is clear that the full power is not obtained by the female in the decision-making or political affairs. Therefore, as the patriarchal societies can be termed as male dominated society, matrilineal societies cannot be termed as female dominated societies. In spite of cohesion of power between male and female, the position of women in matriarchal societies is far better than that of patriarchal societies.

Undoubtedly, when the comparison comes between the women of tribal and non-tribal, we find that the position of tribal women is far better than those of her counterparts in non-tribal areas. The womenfolk of tribal societies enjoy many privileges. They are permitted liberty in different spheres of life. Women are independent to take part in all the social, religious and cultural functions. The society sanctions them to move without restraint within and outside the village. They could profusely mix with the boys and select their life-partners without any social obstacles. Writing about the Naga women, Haimendorf said, “Many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure
the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages"1107.

Though the Assamese Hindu society is not so much liberal to give women so much freedom like the tribal societies, but since the tribal society is the part of the Assamese society, therefore some of the customs and traditions are followed jointly by both the societies. The liberty and flexibility of the tribal society have greatly influenced the Assamese society; therefore on the whole we can conclude that in the bygone days women of Assam enjoyed better privileges, better status in comparison to the women of the other parts of India. Some of the conservatism found in the Assamese society could have been removed if the society would have recognized the role and contribution of women in all spheres of life, even in the household life. The Assamese society could have moved on the track of all round progress if the male would have provided support to women to walk along with them despite of subjugating and suppressing them.

After the overall study of the status of women in Assam from mythological period to Ahom period, we can divide them into two classes, royal class and common class. When we relatively compare the position of these two classes of women, we find that the position varies from one class to other. The royal women in all periods of history enjoyed greater privileges. As consorts of the kings or mothers of the kings, they occupied

a respectable position in the society and their achievements were recorded
in the history, but the common women could not enjoy the same privileges.
Their achievements in the household life or in the economic life were not
accounted by the ancient and medieval Assamese society. But we can
undoubtedly say that women of the common class, though was not entitled
to enjoy so much privileges and comforts, but earned respect and honour
from the society. The kings were treated as father of the people of their
kingdom and people followed them in all the matters. Since the kings of
ancient Assam praised the chastity, beauty and quality of the queens and
showed great respect towards them, which is recorded in the inscriptions,
therefore on the basis of this, we can infer that women of common class
were given the respect and honour by the society.

That the women occupied a honourable and consolidated
position in the society could be easily gauged from the fact that no evidence
of torture in the form of rape, dowry, bride burning, female infanticide,
Sati etc. is obtained from the sources of the ancient and medieval Assamese
society. With the beginning of the modern period, no doubt the numbers
of educated women have increased in the society. There is increasing
participation of women in politics and boisterous demand for 33% reservation of women in Parliament has hogged the limelight as a major
burning issue. Social consciousness about equal rights of women and
undercurrent revolt against male chauvinism have grown up slowly. Even
the equal rights of the women in the father's property in the form of Law
of inheritance had been introduced by the parliament, which were absent
in the ancient and medieval Assamese society. But when we see the other
side of the coin, we find that with the increasing power and rights, violence on women too had increased considerably in the recent period. The ominous custom of dowry has silently invaded the pluralistic society of Assam recently, which was not prevalent in ancient and medieval period. Almost every day we find that either any woman is raped or she is tortured or burned for dowry. The marriage was considered as sacred institution in the earlier days and cases of divorce were very rare in the society. Divorce was seen as a sinful act by the society, But this has become very common now-a-days. Women are not safe today as they were in the earlier days. In spite of their education and rights they are unable to protect themselves from the cruelty of the society. It has been difficult for them to move freely in the society, the traces of which were clearly absent in the earlier days. Many women organizations had taken birth to stop violence and atrocities on women, but in the ancient and medieval days, we do not find any such women organization because there was no such cruelty or torture on women. What is the use of such power, education and rights of women when they are not given the honour and respect in the society? The society should look back towards their traditions and values, which were made by their ancestors and must follow them. Women who serve the society as daughter, wife, sister and mother, should not be overlooked by the society. Women, who create the future of the society, should be honoured and respected and then only a society could progress and a country would be called a great nation.