This dissertation entitled “Women and Mental Health: A Study of Social Attitude with Special Reference to the Sonitpur District of Assam” intends to study society’s attitude towards mentally ill women in Assam. Biomedical, social, economic, and cultural factors play a major role in identification and understanding of diseases. The rigid hold of repressive social structures impacts the lives of people in tradition-driven countries like India to a great extent. Stigma creates fear and negative attitude towards the stigmatized. Women in such societies are doubly stigmatized when they bear the tag of mental illness. The status and position of a particular group or community in the society can be assessed through the study of attitude towards the mentally ill women. This dissertation has looked at the history of mental illness in the West as well as in India. While focussing on the neighbours, family members, and medical health practitioner’s attitude towards mentally ill women of Sonitpur district of Assam along with the socio-cultural and socio-economic factors in shaping such attitudes, the study also takes into account the representation of mentally ill women in popular media.

The study is informed by theoretical perspectives of psychoanalysis of Sudhir Kakar and Michel Foucault (Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason). Its conceptual framework is further informed by the insights of feminists such as Elaine Showalter and Phylis Chesler. The methodology specially draws on feminist theory, which interprets mental illness as a product of women’s social and political operation in a patriarchal society. Ethnographic method has been used for the collection of narratives from the field. The texts for study here constitute the narratives collected from the field. Direct observation and face to face interaction and qualitative analyses of narratives collected from the field constitute the methods of this work. Informants have been purposely selected on the basis of their willingness to co-operate. This study is also conducted through analysis of various cultural texts.

The dissertation has been divided into five chapters excluding the conclusion. The introductory chapter includes the objective of the work, methodology, and
chapterization. The second chapter deals with the concept of disease as a social construction with special reference to mental illness. The third chapter maps the theoretical work on construction and differentiation of gender in society, with particular reference to India apart from exploring the connections between mental health and gender. The fourth chapter analyzes the politics of representation of the mentally ill, particularly mentally ill women in popular media such as films, advertisements, soap operas, novels to analyze the myths and stereotypes concerning mental illness. In the fifth chapter I have discussed thirteen case studies that were collected from the field and analyze these with the help of feminists and psychoanalytic perspectives. The study concludes with the exploration of different factors responsible for shaping the negative attitude towards mentally ill women in the society.

The study makes an attempt to understand and analyze the myriad factors that shape attitude towards mental illness in general and focuses particularly on the way in which the stigma attached to mental illness is magnified in the case of women. By undertaking a comprehensive analyses of the texts (narratives collected from the field and representational practices in the popular media), the study reveals the essential aspects related to the life and social status of mentally ill women in the field area.