

## CHAPTER-V

### ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOIVIEN

#### 5.1: Economic Status of Women

Our previous discussion proved 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 observed that women contribute their economic share by doing many vital activities such as food preparation, child bearing and caring, family management, fuel and water caring, 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 zconomic status and the economic activities of women in the ancient and medieval Assamese society. To find out the economic contribution of women, let us analyze in brief the economy of Assam in those days and the role of women in it.

### 5.1.1: Women in 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<sup>240</sup>.

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 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 traveler 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.<sup>241</sup>" These prove that proper care was taken for irrigation from the ancient period, which helped in the cultivation of paddy and other agriculture products.

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<sup>240</sup> *Rigveda VIII,101,15,F-17, 40.5.*

<sup>241</sup> Waters, on Yuan Chwang's *Travel in India* , ii, p-185.

Rice being the staple food, the major part of the cultivated land was devoted to the cultivation of paddy. Different variants of paddies were cultivated in ancient and medieval Assam. The YT enumerated nearly twenty variants rice<sup>242</sup>. Besides rice growing, people cultivated other crops like pulses and mustered seeds.<sup>243</sup>

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 guda (molasses) prepared from sugarcane in the earthen pots and pumpkins and gourds, containing painting materials.<sup>244</sup> The Bargaon grant refers to "arable land with cluster (hills) of gourds (labukutiksetra)". The cultivation of various kinds of vegetables is mentioned in many works. The other green vegetables and esculents are Ada(ginger), Haladhi (Termeric). Kachu (the arum plant), Lai, Lapha, Chuka, IVIaricha, 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 inscription proved the cultivation of different fruit trees. The epigraphs mention kantaphala (jack fruit), Amra (mango), Jambu (Eugenia jambollana), Sriphala, Dumbari (fig tree), Sakhotaka (the walnut tree), Badari (jujube tree), Lakucha or Amalaka, ( a kind of bread fruit tree), Amla, Betasa (gamboze tree), Puga (betel nut), Coraka (a wild palm tree whose nuts are eaten as betel nuts), Rudraska (bead tree) and many sour fruits, such as Au(dillenis indica) Tentali 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 amleh, which has such an excellence of flavor that every person who tastes it, prefers it to the plum. There are also coconut trees, pepper-vines, area trees and sadij, (malavothrum

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<sup>242</sup> *YT Chap II 5*, pp-293-29&

<sup>243</sup> F. Hamilton, *An account of Assam*, p-58

<sup>244</sup> P.C Choudbury, *The History of the Civilization of the People of Assam*, P-335.

or tezpāt) in great plenty<sup>245</sup>. The acid fruits of the people are Au-tenga, amara, Jalphai, Katrina, the two kinds of Thekera, viz. Bar-thekera and kuji-thekera, kavja, teteli, Karddai, Jara, Jeneru, Leteku, Robab-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<sup>246</sup>. Spices were also produced in the country. The YT and other literary works mentioned many varieties of spices. The YT mentions of plantations like haridra (turmeric), ardraka (ginger), jiraka (cumin), pippaliyaka (long pepper), marica (pepper), sarisa (mustard), karpura and others. The same reference is found in the KP<sup>247</sup>, 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.

### **5.1.2: Women as salves 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 laborers for the purpose of ploughing and reaping. Both Brihaspati and Narada were unambiguous on this point. Thus Narada confirmed that among the different kind of paid servants, the "soldiers, agriculturists and porters, the agricultural laborers occupied the second rank in importance and should get one-tenth of the product of the soil in case the pay scale of the hired laborer had not been properly fixed. According to Brihaspati, such a laborer should receive a third or fifth part of the crops. But if a laborer would have neglected his task his payment should be stopped and he

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<sup>245</sup> *Asiatic Researches, II*, p-173.

<sup>246</sup> F. Hamilton *An Account of Assam*, pp-46,55.

<sup>247</sup> *YT, II/7*, 183-184, see also *Kumara Harana V-208*

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 agriculture works and also could ask insolvent borrowers to repay their debts through such services. Parmananda, 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 husband name in other's farms in order to repay a similar Loan. A third man Srirama, a native of the village called Simalwa or Simaliya was a hired hand (munis, munih, duniya bandha) at a rich villager's establishment at 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 bought and sold openly, the price ranging from about twenty rupees for an adult male of good caste to three rupees for a low caste girl." <sup>248</sup>

Though we do not get any details about the work of the female slaves, but observing the low class females 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 work but were also occupies in the agriculture works during transplanting the seedling and reaping the crops. Now, days the proportion of women worker in Assam is hiring agriculture then in any other sector and industry.

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<sup>248</sup> Bhusana, pp-141-f. cited in M. Neog, *Early history of the Vaishanava faith and movement in Assam*, p-77.

### **5.1.3 : 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 kamrupa the wives of cultivators watched their crops <sup>249</sup>. 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 caste were not allowed to work out side 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. 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. other than kitchen gardening they give their contribution in the family economy by doing knitting, embroidery, weaving etc.

### **5.1.4 : Women in Crafts and industries**

The craftsmen of kamrupa played a great role in 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 India Society

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<sup>249</sup> Raghuvansa, ix, 20.

<sup>250</sup> P.C. Choudhury, the History of Civilization of the People of Assam, P-338.

### **5.1.5 : Women in 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<sup>251</sup>. The words like *Siri* and *Vayitri*, meaning female weaver appeared in the Vedic literature. In the ancient and medieval Assamese society, there was a class of professional weavers; women of every Assamese family were engaged in these occupations, which is still prevalent in the rural society as household industry. Dr. Anuva Saikia points out that in the present rural sectors of Assam, in the industry sector the percentage of female engaged in the households industry is the highest in Assam among the major states of India. From time immemorial, spinning of cotton and cocoons of different kinds of silk worms and also extracting fibers from certain kinds of plants and trees had been in existence.

### **5.1.6 : Women in Manufacture of cotton garments**

In the ancient period cotton shrubs were grown for the manufacture of cotton cloths. The use of *Karpasa* (cotton) garments is also shown by the *kalika Purna* of the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the *Harsacarita*<sup>252</sup>. Cotton was cultivated throughout the whole country. The adjacent hill tribes more extensively cultivated it; but they used it little<sup>253</sup>. The hill tribes bartered it for other commodities with the people of the plains who spinned threads out of it. The tribes, who cultivated cotton most, were the Garos, the Nagas and the Mikirs. The cotton cloths of Assam were very famous due to its Excellency in the art of manufacture and so it was in great

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<sup>251</sup> RV,II 38 & AV,V.7.42.

<sup>252</sup> H.C.Cowell, *Harscharita*, pp- 2121.

<sup>253</sup> F.B. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, p-59.

Demand in and outside the reign. Other than cotton cloths, the KP mentioned about the woolen garments (Kambala), bark cloths( Valka), Silk AND HEMP CLOTHS(SANAVASTRAM), Bark cloths were made of fibers 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 fibers of the barks of the plants, Even in the present days, Most the tribal's were found to manufacture excellent fabrics of various designs through his process. An early references to a variety of bark cloth known as srnkhalā cloths won by the kiratas, forming the army of Bhagadatta is mentioned in the Mhb.

#### **5.1.7: Women in Manufacture of Silk cloths:**

Other than cotton clothes, Assam was very popular for the manufacture of silk clothes in all over the country. The Assamese knew that 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 pages about Magadha, Angra, Pandra and the "country of the cocoon-rearers", (Kasa-karanam bhumi)<sup>254</sup>. This "country of cocoon reares" 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 references to ksauma, dukula and patrorna fabrics from Suvarnakundya is the modern Sonkudiha in the district of kamrupa. 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 moons light",

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<sup>254</sup> *Ramayana*, Kishkindhyakanda, 40

"abhoga umbrella wrapped is dukula cloth" and a "verietiy of silken objects woven out of pattasutra". Dukula is also referred to in the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala 225.

Assam enjoyed a reputation from remote antiquity for producing silk of 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<sup>256</sup>. Pliny showed some knowledge of the silk trade that was carried on through Assam. The antiquity of the silk industry in 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, eastern Bangal, early in the Christain era. Hodson states that silk insects were noticed the excellent quality of silk. Quazim wrote that the silk of Assam was very excellent resembling that of the China. Tavernier remarked that the silk of Assam was produced on trees and the stuff made of them was very brilliant.

The different varieties of silk, especially associated with Assam are known as pat ( patta), edi (attacus ricine) 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 indigenou product of Assam. The Latin name of muga also indicated that it is chiefly associated with Assam. The Latin name of muga also indicated that it is chiefly associated with Assam, through perhaps a small quantity is produced in Dehra Dun. The rearing of edi cocoons takes a long time before they provide silk which is for spinning. The cocoons are fed as the name indicates,

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<sup>255</sup> Plate ii, L.38

<sup>256</sup> s.rahguru, *Mediaval Assamese Society*, P-293

on castor plants. The edi cloths are usually white with a yellowish tinge, smooth as well as rough and very warm. Used during winter. The muga has many varieties like the chmpa, the cocoons of which are fed on the campa tree ( michelia champaka) and the mejankari or adakari, feeding on the plants of the same name. The muga cloths are usually yellowish with the tinge of gold and often dyed red with lae. The pat silk is the product of bombyx textor and bombyx croesi. The cocoons of which are fed on the mulberry trees. Of all the silk cloths the pat fibers are the smoothest and the finest, with a mixture of white and yellowish tinge. The evidence from the Arthasastra, the 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 kamrupa had a reputation equal to those of China. The traditional has been continued to the present times.

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 in to Assam at an early period. But a new epoch began with the arrival of the Ahoms since they new this art from very times, and in course of time it acquire a national status so much so that every Ahom women was expected to be proficient in weaving irrespective of her birth and rank.

#### **Women in the spinning and weaving industry:**

Assamese women contribution a large part of share in the field of spinning and weaving in the from of Handloom industry. This Industry had always been given importance by the Ahom kings. In the Ahom period the professional weavers

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<sup>257</sup>Duarah, *Edi Silk of Assam*,pp-77-111

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 region of Purandar Rajah, one Madhura Tanti excelled all other weavers of the day and was for his services to the royal family, granted rent free land by the king"<sup>258</sup>. Besides professional weavers, the handloom industry occupied a significant place in every Assamese household specially among women. Now a day's 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 women 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 of females of the region were able to become self dependent in the worse situation, they could even share the economic responsibilities 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 Barborooah of Ahom king Pratap singha (1603-41), 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 Mahammedan attacks, Momai Tamuli Barborooah was given the responsibility by the Ahom king pratap Singha to reorganize 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 women, be it rich or poor, contributed some part of their duty.

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<sup>258</sup> Cited in B.k. Barua, *Asomiya Bhasa and Sanskriti*, p-134

Towards the country to improve the worse situation of the region. Therefore he promulgated an order that every man should weave basket or a sieve and every capable women 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<sup>259</sup>.

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 women, one officer was appointed in each village and anybody found neglecting his or her works without any responsible case was punished. The women were also appointed to supervise the looms in the royal harem. The KO records that the mother of one Bhavaniputra Gopal Ata, was an expert weaver, and was entrusted with the charge of superintending the twice score looms that were in the royal harem during the reign of the Ahom king Suhungmung, alias Dihingia Raja<sup>260</sup>. 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 place campus. Queen Sarveswari, consort of king Siva Singha started a school on the place 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 state as well as to see the activities of the paiks who were in charge of supplying yarns and other raw materials for the looms of the queen and in the same way under the parbatia queen<sup>261</sup>, there were the other officers known as

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<sup>259</sup> S.K Bhuyan. *An Assamese Nurjahan*, p-28

<sup>260</sup> B.Sharma, *Durbin*, p-10.

<sup>261</sup> S.K. Bhuyan, *Buranjir bani*, 1956,P-28

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 caste from the queen downward weave four kinds of silk that are produced in the country, and with which three fourth of the people are clothed. 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<sup>262</sup>.

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 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 become fruitless if she did not know weaving. She had to face shameless remarks from the society if she would have worn clothes woven by others. As Assamese women 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 born a large financial burden of her family. The universal practice of weaving by every Assamese woman led to great Bengali preacher and scholar Pundit Sivanath Sastri to

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<sup>262</sup> S.raj Guru, *Medieval Assamese Society*, pp-202,304.

Remarks during his visit to Assam in the last century that it was only in Assam that he found justification for the alleged derivation of word wife from weave.

#### **5.1.9: Women in Embroidery Works**

Apart from weaving, Assamese women were 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 Krishna. The embroidery work was done by either colored threads, or Muga or God or Silver threads. H.F. Samman in his monograph inform us that, in the Ahom period there were separate artists known 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.<sup>263</sup>

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 their male counterparts, the family's economic burden on their shoulders. Besides achieving economic power through economic activities, let us find out whether they had any economic rights according to the laws of inheritance.

#### **5.1.10: Property rights of women:**

We have already discussed in the previous chapter that in the Vedic ages women was given high and respectable position in certain sphere like education.

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<sup>263</sup> P.C. Vhouthury, *The History Civilization of the people of Assam*, pp-306,308.

mitakshara expressly declared that she could spend from the family property only with the concurrence of the husband. The only right she got was the right to get maintenance from her husband. Altekar expresses that the accient Hindu legislator were unable to protect the wife's righ of maintenance<sup>266</sup> 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. Thus the theory of joint ownership of the husband and the wife practically a legal fiction. In effect to 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 ownership theory helped the wife only in securing a number of certain minor rights and privileges.

The joint owneship helped the wife in gaining an absolute righ of maintenance against husband. According to one of the verses of Manu, the husband was bound 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 expenditur to his first wife. If the wife. If the wife was assaulted, it was the responsibility of the husband to protect and maintain her. The husband was bound to give maintemance 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. <sup>267</sup> In the matter of partition, however the Mitakshara-law allowed a wife to get an equal share with her own son or sons.

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<sup>266</sup> Altekar, *The position of women in Hindu Civilization*.

<sup>267</sup> Indra, *The Status of Women in Ancient India*, p-159

when the division is made in the lifetime of her husband. In case she had Stridhana from her father in law in her possessio, then she was also entitled to half the share.

#### **5.1.12: 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 Mine describes Stridhana as: “The settle 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”.

Stridhana originated through the custom of the bride price obtained by the brides 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 of sometimes even the whole of the bride price to the bride, which became her separate. She had full liberty to spend it during her life time. After her death, this property went to her children, but if she died childless the property went to her parents or their next of kin. 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 Prajapatya forms, no bride price was given. In that case, the 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. According to Vasistha, parinahya or nuptial presents constituted Stridhana.

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 woman for owning separate property. Devala 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 husbands 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.<sup>268</sup>

In another similar incident, the husband of Dharmadana informed her that she could take away as much of his property as she liked, and retire to her parent's house. The Vedic literature is silent about the precise scope of Stridhana. The idea of its scope was found from the Dharmasastra works. Manu is the earliest writer to give a comprehensive description of Stridhana.<sup>269</sup> According to him its consists of six varieties:

- 1) Gifts given by the father,
- 2) Gifts given by the mother,
- 3) Gifts given by the brother,

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<sup>268</sup> Altekhar, *The position of women in Hindu civilization*, p-217

<sup>269</sup> Dr Savita Visnoi, *Economic Status of women in Ancient India*, P- 16.

- 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 woman of these parents 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 comensation given to the wife at the time of her suppression on the occasion of her husband's second marriage<sup>270</sup>.

Apparently it can be concluded from the above description of Stridhana as we find in majority of the accient Hindu Dharmasastras that it mainly consisted of gifts provided by the relatives, either at the time of the marriage of subsequent to it.

#### **5.1.13: Right of woman over her Stridhana :**

The Vedic literature did not mention above 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 letter over her Stridhana. Manu for instance declared that a wife should never make any expenditure out of the family property belonging to several or even out of her own Stridhana without her husband's sanction. But Katyayana hold that woman

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<sup>270</sup> Indra, *The status of women in Ancient India*, p-274

possessed the power of sale and mortgage even over her immoveable property included in their Stridhana. Narada different from him and declared that woman could dispose of only the movables in their Stridhana <sup>271</sup>.

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. 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. He further remarked, "those relation who live on the property of woman commit sin and sink into hell". They are to be treated as outcastes, if they divided the ornaments of a widow, which she wore during her husband's lifetime.

About the right of husband to use the Stridhana, Kautily mentioned that, "in calamities such as disease and famine, in warding off danger and in charitable acts, the husband too many make use of this property. Neither shall there be any complaint against the enjoyment of this property if it by mutual consent nor there any complaint if this property has been enjoyed be 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 case of Gandharva and the Asurs forms of marriage, shall be restored otherwise the use of this property by the husband shall be dealt with as a case of theft"<sup>272</sup>.

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<sup>271</sup> Altekar, *The position of women in Hindu Civilization*, p-224

<sup>221</sup> RV, H2-7

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 property<sup>273</sup>.

## **5.2: Economic Status of Muslim Women**

### **5.2.1 : Property Rights**

Historically, many scholars maintain that women in Muslim societies had more property rights than in many other parts of the world.<sup>274</sup> However, as the world has modernised, women's rights in many Muslim dominated countries are comparatively restricted. As Valentine M. Moghadam argues, "much of the economic modernization [of women] was based on income from oil, and some came from foreign investment and capital inflows. Economic development alters the status of women in different ways across nations and classes."<sup>275</sup>

Women's in the Quran are based around the marriage contract. A woman, according to Islamic, does not have to give her pre-marriage possessions to her husband and received a *mahr* (dowry) which she is allowed to keep.<sup>276</sup> Furthermore, any earnings that a woman receives through employment or business is hers to keep and need not be contributed towards family expenses. This is because the financial responsibility for reasonable housing, food and other household expenses for the family, including the spouse, fall entirely on the husband. In traditional Islamic law, a woman is also not responsible for the

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<sup>273</sup> *Arthasastra, II, p-214*

<sup>274</sup> *Lewis, what Went Wrong? 2002, pages 82-53*<sup>273</sup>

<sup>275</sup> *Valentine M. Moghadam. Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East. (Rienner Publishers, USA, 1993)*

<sup>276</sup> *Jamal Badawi, The status of women in Islam, p97.*

upkeep of the home and may demand paymand for any work she does in the domestic sphere.<sup>277</sup>

In Islam, women are entitled to the right of inheritance, Quran 4:7. In general, Islam allows females half the inheritance share available to males who have the same degree of relation to the deceased. Quran 4:11. This difference derives from men's obligations to financially support their families.<sup>278</sup>

The Quran contains specific and detailed guidance regarding the division of inherited wealth, such as Surah Baqarah, chapter 2 verse 180, chapter 2 verse 240; Surah Nisa, chapter 4 verse 7-9, chapter 4 verse 19, chapter 4 verse 33; and Surah Maidah, chapter 5 verse 106-108. Three verses in the Quran describe the share of close relatives, Surah Nisah chapter 4 verses 11, 12 and 176. However, many Islamic majority countries have allowed inherently unfair (towards women) inheritance law and/or customs to dominate.

### **5.2.2: The Right to Seek Employment**

If you take a look at many societies today, a woman is only valued and considered important if she performs the functions of a man, (while at the same time displaying her feminine attraction to the public). While these women may carry the immense responsibility of bearing and rearing children, you have to admit that they may still be at par with men in nearly area of life. The result is the present-day confusion concerning sex role differentiation, resulting in very large numbers of divorces and emotionally distraught children.

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<sup>277</sup> Al-Misri, Ahmad. *Reliance of the Traveller*, p-98

<sup>278</sup> *The position of women in Islam* by Dr. Jamal A. Badawi - *Islamic Dawah Centre International*-page 13

In Islam, however, the value and importance of women in society and the true measure of their success as human beings, is measured with completely different criteria: their fear of Allah (SWT) and obedience to Him, and fulfillment of the duties He has entrusted them with, particularly that of bearing, rearing and teaching children.

Nevertheless, Islam is a practical religion, and responds to human needs and life situations. Many women need, or wish, to work for various reasons. For example, they may possess a needed skill, such as a teacher or a doctor. While Islam does not prohibit women working outside the home, it does stipulate that the following restrictions be followed to safeguard the dignity and honor of women and the purity and stability of the Islamic society, (the conduct of women, after all, is the “backbone” of any society):

1. Outside employment should not come before, or seriously interfere with her responsibilities as wife and mother.
2. Her work should not be a source of friction within the family, and the husband’s consent is required in order to eliminate later disagreements. If she is not married, she must have her guardian’s consent.
3. Her appearance, manner and tone of speech and overall behavior should follow Islamic guidelines. These include: restraining her glances in relation to any men near the work place, wearing correct Islamic dress avoiding men, not walking in a provocative manner, and not using make-up or perfume in public.
4. Her job should not be one which causes moral corruption in society, or involve any prohibited trade or activity, after her own religion, morals, dignity and good behavior, or subject her to temptations.
5. Her job should not be one which is mixing and associating with men.

6. A woman should try to seek employment in positions which require a woman's special skills, or which relate to the needs of women and children, such as teaching, nursing other women, midwifery with specialization's like pediatric or obstetrics-gynecology.

### **5.3: Economic Status of Tribal women**

The tribal women of Northeast India a vital and fole to build the economic configuration of the family as well as that of society. Their valuable conuibution can be observed by their. Engagement a variety of economic activities to increase the family wealth and income. Their economic share in the family call be scrutonized by their different fundamental and non ending activities of household such as pounding the paddy, food preparation, collection of firewood from the jungle, cleaning and washing clothes and utensils, chid bearing and caring, family management, water carrying, rearing and feeding of domestic birds and animals and a host of other activities associated with the house. Outside the household too, tribal women carry out many tasks such as selling of vegetables and fruits in the market. Besides, they engage a substantive preoportion of their work force in the cultivation work. It is especially more meaningful in the context of agrarian society of the tribes of Northeast India where men and women take equal responsibility of labour in the agricultural work. Therefore, it becomes very necessary to make a comprehensive and expedient study of the contribution of women in the economic activities of their societies. To find out the economic contribution of women, let us analyze in brief the economic structure of tribal society and the role of women on it.

#### **5.3.1 : Agricultural contribution of women**

The economic organization of the tribal people of Northeast Inddia center round agriculture and the subsidiary means of livelihood like the collection of forest

Produce, fishing, weaving and hunting. It also includes their trade within their own communities as well as with other people. Agriculture is their primary source of occupation, which keeps them busy throughout the year. In this agricultural society, the role of women is very important. The very success of its operation depends upon women, as they are the one who carry out most of the work from beginning till the time of harvesting. There is no division of labour as such between married and unmarried women and all the tasks are discharged by both married and unmarried women. Since majority of the tribes are hill-dwellers, its people prefer jhum or shifting type of cultivation. Jhum cultivation involves two phases of agriculture activity, the first involving the preparation of a tract of forest land for cultivation after clearing the forest growth and putting them into fire. The second phase of Jhum cultivation comprises of the main cultivation work. Agriculture of this type involves hard labour and thus often necessitates corporate activity. Men and women join together to share the toil. The first phase of jhum cultivation begins with the clearing of the patch of forestland from January and continues till April depending upon the availability of manpower and the size of Jhum-field. The clearing of the forestland is done jointly both by men and women. The nature of work is divided sex-wise. Men do the more arduous tasks and women are assigned with easier but endless work. In the first phase, felling of big trees and removing the logs are done by men whereas women engage themselves in rooting out the medium and small size trees and bushes, setting of fire to dry stem and branches and cleaning of the lower vegetations, etc. the second phase of jhuming starts in the month of April or May with the beginning of the actual cultivation work. In the main cultivation work women, play a significant and major role from sowing of seeds to harvesting and then husking and winnowing of crops all these jobs are primarily entrusted to women. Generally the crops that grow in their jhum cultivation are mustard leaf, maize, millet, paddy, pulses cucumber, pumpkins, beans, chillies, garlic, ginger, onion, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cotton, tobacco etc.

### 5.3.2: Weaving

Apart from agricultural work, the other economic activity performed by the tribal women is weaving. During the month of December and January, when there is no agricultural work, women devote their spare time in weaving. Weaving is the traditional occupation of tribal women of Northeast India and they are well versed in this art. Their expertise in the art is manifested in the choice or selection of the colour for the fabrication of embroidery and the shape, size as well as designs of their costumes. All the women irrespective of their age except the minor girl know weaving it is also proved as one can find that loom is an essential commodity from every house. In fact, some of the tribes, such as Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh consider their house to be incomplete without the loom in front of it<sup>279</sup>. Women generally use the indigenous loom for weaving which they make themselves. Normally, their loom is simple, light and portable so there is no fixed place for weaving, nor are fixed structures required. It can be set up in any convenient space of the house. The tribal women manufacture their own as well as beautiful apparels for their own as well as family members. Every wife weaves a shawl for her husband and if someone fails, it becomes a misery for her as the entire community laughs at her incapacity<sup>280</sup>. The different tribes and sub-tribes use different objects such as cotton, *muga* yarn, wool, bark of local plant etc. for spinning and weaving. The Singphos grow cotton in their house and spun the yarn themselves. The Sherdukpens obtain yarn from the bark of plants known as hongchong and hongche<sup>281</sup>. The Sulungs use the fibres of a shrubby nettle plant called *Hyek*<sup>282</sup>. The Idu Mimis

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<sup>279</sup> Parul Dutta. *The Singphos*, p. 23

<sup>280</sup> Krishnushankar Maitra, *Nagaland darling of northeast*, p. 62.

<sup>281</sup> R.R.P. Sharma. *The Sherdukpens*. Pp 22-23.

<sup>282</sup> R.K. Deuri, *The Sulungs*, p.18

Use nettle fibre along with human hair to make the thick coats of men, which also serve as a defensive covering against the thrust of a hostile arrow<sup>283</sup>. E.T. Dalton comments about the Idus that. “They were probably the first people on this side of the Himalayas to discover the valuable properties of the *Rhea nivea* and many others of the nettle tribe; with the fibre of one of these nettles these they weave a cloth so strong and stiff that, made into jackets, it is used by themselves and by the Abors as a sort of armour”<sup>284</sup>. The women not only make the wearing apparels for their family members but they also make woolen blankets and handloom clothes with attractive designs, towels, sarees, dhotis, lungis, shawls, bags, mattresses, carpets etc. Which they sell in good price. Apart from selling the handmade accessories, the tribal women make income by selling milk of cows and buffaloes. Hill Lalung women make subsidiary income by selling home made spirits”<sup>285</sup>. In this way they contribute their valuable share through agricultural and weaving work in the economy of the family, besides, they inherit some properties also.

### **5.3.3: Inheritance of Property**

Among the Patriarchal tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and Tripura, the laws of inheritance or property are governed by the customary practices, of each tribes and sub-tribes. The customary laws give incredibly limited rights to women in the ownership and inheritance of the family property. As mentioned earlier, except Garo, Khasis of Meghalaya and the Hill Laungs of Assam, all the tribes of Northeast India are patriarchal, partrilocal and paulinear and hence inheritance descends through male line only. The son gets all the movable and immovable properties, whereas the daughter never inherits any immovable properties like land and house. They are entitled only to make

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283. Tapan Kumar M. Baruah, *The Idu Mishmis*, p. 25-26

284. Cites in Tapan Kumar M. Baruah, *The Idu Mishmis*, p. 26-28

285. Birenra Kumar Gohain, *the Hill Lanungs*, p. 25.

use of it. But the customs permit the daughters to inherit the ornaments of mother, which are passed as heirloom from mother to daughter. According to the customary laws of Sherdukpcns, Mijils, Sulungs, Boris, Digaru Mishmis, Padam and Minyong sub-tribes of Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, the lion share of mother's properties are inherited by the eldest daughter<sup>286</sup>.

Apart from the properties of mother, the unmarried daughter have absolute light over her own earnings derived from different activities such as poultry, piggcry, bead works, weaving, embroidery, etc. but after marriage the ownership of her properties is generally shared also by her husband. But she has the absolute light over the properties that she gets from her parents and relatives as marriage gift. These gifts are in the form of ornaments, utensils clothing's, domestic birds and animals that she reared at her parent's house<sup>287</sup>.

The custom of inheritance of property by the widows in Arunachal Pradesh differs from tribe to tribe<sup>288</sup>. According to the customary laws of the tribes of Digaru Mismi, Idu Misluni, Miju Mishmi, Sherdukpen, Apatani, Wancho, Nocte, Nishi, Miji, Aka, Khowan, Nishing, Tangsa, Sulung the inheritance rights of widows in the deceased husband's property is usufructuary. She can inherit the husband's property on behalf of her minor sons i.e., she will only be the custodian of the property for her minor sons provided she remains widow and stays with the family of her in-laws. A Singpho or a Khampti widow

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<sup>286</sup> R.N. Bagchi, *Family and inheritance of property among tribes of Arunachal Pradesh* Published in *RESARUN, the journal of Directorate of Research. Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh*, Vol. V. No 1,1078 Also published in Dr. P.C. Dutta Dr. K.D. Duarah, *Aspects of culture and customs of Arunachal Pradesh*, pp.4-5.

<sup>287</sup> *Status of women in tribal society Arunachal Pradesh*, ed by Dr. B.B. Pandey, Directorate of Research Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 1997.

having no male child is Entitled to get a share in her deceased husband's property. Whereas in the society of Monpa and Hill Miri, a widow gets the absolute right over her husband's property she remains unmarried and stays with her in-laws family. But she does not have the right to Transfer the real properties without the approval of her in-laws. Among the Digaru Mishmi and Miju Mishmi tribal societies, if a widow has a male child and she does not want to marry, then her rights over her deceased husband's property is not usufructuary but absolute.

In Nagaland, a widow is entitled to use her husband's lands and house during her lifetime if she does not remarry but in case of remarriage, she has no right over her first husband's property<sup>289</sup>. Among Rengma Nagas, the cattle are also inherited by the male heirs. Though the cattle remain in the possession of the widow after her husband's death but she cannot sell these animals without the permission of the male heirs. She could sell an animal only if she can prove to the male heirs it is essential for her maintenance and part of the price goes to the male heir<sup>290</sup>.

Among the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia society of Meghalaya and Hill Lalungs of Assam, inheritance is purely matrilineal in organization. Descent is traced through the mother only, only through the father. All properties belong to the women, and is passed on from mother to daughter. Male children cannot receive or even claim any part of the property, which they themselves may have acquired by their own labour. The Khasi and Jaintia laws of inheritance are almost identical. In Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the inheritance of all real property passes from mother to the youngest daughter (*Ka Khadduh*). The other daughters however, on their mother's death, are entitled to get a share of their mother's

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<sup>289</sup> M. Hiram, *Social and cultural life of Nagas*, p. 84.

<sup>290</sup> J.P. Mills, *The Rengma Nagas*, p. 144.

property, but the youngest daughter gets the lion's share of the family property e.g. the family jewellery and the family house and the greater part of whatever is there in the house. Because it is she, whose duty is to perform the family ceremonies, looking after the property, old aged parents and propitiate the family ancestors. But she cannot dispose or the house without the unanimous consent of her sister<sup>291</sup>. If there is no daughter, then inheritance would pass by the "knight's move" to the sister's youngest daughter, who would be succeeded by the youngest daughter of the latter and so on and failing sister's daughters succession would go to mother's sisters and the their female descendants <sup>292</sup>. Similar is the case the Garo inheritance. Among the Garos also, all the daughter's or a family do not equally inherit properties but one of the daughters, not necessarily the youngest one, is selected inheritress (*nokhna*) by the parents. If a couple die without leaving any daughter, the *Charchis* select a Nakna or inheritor for the family<sup>293</sup>.

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<sup>291</sup> P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, p. 83

<sup>292</sup> P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, p. 83

<sup>293</sup> Capt, B.S. Rana, *The people of Meghalaya*, p.202.