

CHAPTER VI

RELIGIOUS STATUS OF WOMEN

6.1: RELEGIOUS STATUS HINDU WOMEN

6.1.1: Inroduction

Religion is the most sensitive personal matter in every human life. Religious rights and privileges play a dominant role in every person's life, be it man or woman. The religion determines social status of an individual and accordingly gives him or her certain rights and privileges in rituals and rituals and sacrifices. Let us make a comprehensive survey in this chapter to find out the religious status and privileges accorded to women in ancient and medieval Assam. Though the available sources of ancient Assam are silent about the religious rights and privileges accorded to women, but we have tried to depict it through the status provided to the women in the *Vedas and Purans*. But literary and epigraphic sources prove that the Aryan culture and the Brahmanical religion entered Assam in the very earlier period²⁹⁴. P.C. Choudhury rightly points out, "Naraka and Bhagadatta, the ruler of first political dynasty came under the influence of the Aryans and that they were responsible for the establishment of high class Aryans in the land"²⁹⁵. The other literary sources such as the *Arthashastra*²⁹⁶, the *Brahatsamhita*²⁹⁷, and the *Raghuvamsa*²⁹⁸ also pointed

²⁹⁴ KP, Chap. 38: Nowgong grant, v.7 Nidhanpur grant. Lines 34-35; Tezpur grant, v.30, parbatiya plates, line.32

²⁹⁵ PC Choudhury. *The History of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, p.394.

³⁹⁷ Kern, *Introduction to the Brahatsamhita*, p.32, cited in PC choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, p.394

²⁹⁸ IV, 81-84

to the Spread of the Aryan culture in ancient Assam. The origin of Aryan culture goes back to Vedas. Since the Aryan culture was established in the ancient Assamese women was no different from the position occupied by the women mentioned in the Vedas. Let us first briefly analyze the religious position provided to the women in the Vedas. It is a matter of fact that in order to understand the religious participation of women during medieval Assam it is mandatory to understand the religious aspects of ancient Assam. Hence efforts have been made to make a through study on the religious matters of ancient Assam which is popularly known as kamrupa.

6.1.2: Religious status of women in Vedas:

According to Hindu Dharmasastra, man and women together form one complet whole. In out Hindu scripture God has been described as half man and half women. (The concept of *Ardhnarishwara*). Wife was called *Ardhangini*, which means that neither the life of man nor the life of women achieves excellence or perfection in a state of isolation. She was the source of dharma, artha, Kama for the attainments of the objects of human life²⁹⁹. Furthermore she was the medium through which man attained salvation. That is why; Wife was given equivalent place with her male counterpart in religious rights and privileges³⁰⁰.

In the Vedic period, there wera no temples and images to worship. Numerous religious and faiths were also not found like the present days. People believed in only one supreme principle of the Holy *Vedas*. In this age, the religion was deeply connected with sacrifices

²⁹⁹ *Mbh, Adiparva,70-40*

³⁰⁰ *R.V., BK, hymn 61,v.8*

because sacrifice was the only popular and Well-established method of worshipping divine powers. Obviously, women could not be prohibited to offer sacrifices after their *upanayana*.

The ceremony of Upanayana was performed in respect of both boys and girls. After this ceremony, girls were permitted to study Vedas and other sacred literature and carry out the *Sandhya* rites. Sita is mentioned as performing *Sandhya rites*³⁰¹. Harita holds that women are of two classes, brahmavadini and *sadyovadhu*³⁰². The former remained unmarried and dedicated themselves to the study of the Vedas and the latter used to continue their studies till their marriage. According to AV, a maiden is entitled to marry a bachelor after the completion of her *Brahmacharya* only³⁰³. The girls who were married at an early age sacrifices in which they had to take an active part after their marriage. Kauslya performed a sacrifice in the morning of Rama's installation as an heir apparent³⁰⁴. Mbh described Kunti, the mother of Pandavas as well versed in the mantras of AV³⁰⁵.

Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas was addressed by Vyasa, the author the Mbh as Brahmavedini. In the Vedic age we come across many Brahmavadini ladies like Lopa Mudra, Gargi and Maitreyi, who gathered in the religious congregations and participated in the debate of some puzzling questions of philosophy and displayed wonderful knowledge

³⁰¹ *Ramanaya*, 11.87.19

³⁰² Harita, Dvididha Striya Brahnvadiha sadyo Badhvashe. Cf. Indra, *The status of Women in ancient India*, pp.34-35

³⁰³ *AV.XI-3-18*

³⁰⁴ *Ramanaya*, 11.20.15

³⁰⁵ *Mbh.III.305.20*

of the great religious matters. Some of them such as Vishvavara expounded hymns and also performed sacrifices like priests offered oblations to the Gods³⁰⁶.

Marriage was considered as the ultimate and sacred recommendation to society by *Vedic religion*. The woman therefore was given a sanctified position in the path of religion because her presence was absolute necessary for religious rites and ceremonies. It was obligatory for both husband and wife to take part in the sacrifices. There are several references to couples jointly offering prayers and sacrifices³⁰⁷. The Presence and cooperation of wife was indispensable in religious rites and ceremonies. Being one in body and soul, they performed the religious acts together. Though in very religious performance, the husband took the initiative but without the wife. It was incomplete. Man could not become a spiritual whole, unless his wife accompanied him³⁰⁸. Gods did not accept the oblations offered by a bachelor³⁰⁹. It is found in the great epic, Ramanaya, that in the absence of sita, Rama performed the sacrifice by substituting her with her golden effigy.

But from the later Vedic period the status of women in all spheres of life started declining and upanayana sanskara of women was withdrawn. Hence, the later period did not speak much about the lady scholars. Though the study of Vedas was not permitted to women of later period but they were never denuded from believing in certain religious matters and never deprived of offering prayers to the deities.

³⁰⁶ *RV.V.28-1*

³⁰⁷ *RV.V53,15*

³⁰⁸ *Tamatpuruso jaya vitva kritsnatarmivatmanang matyate.A.Br, 1.2.5.*

³⁰⁹ *Ayajnio vais yopatnikah,Sh.Br.,V.1,10*

6.1.3: Religious cuts and beliefs of Assamese women:

In India, Particularly in Assam, either in ancient age or in medieval age, the image of a woman is visualized as Shakti. She was described in all our ancient texts as the force behind creation and divinity. As expressed in Vedas, “Yatra vartasthuu pujuyanthe rananthe tatra Devtah” (Where women are adored, there the gods are pleased)³¹⁰. As per our mythology. “Learning’, “Prosperity” and “Calamity” are worshipped in the feminine forms. Since ancient Assamese society was based on agriculture, therefore our literature, sculpture and mythology considered woman as “Replica” of the universe. She was highly regarded not only symbol of generation and creators of life; but also as the providers of food, and fertility itself that hold the fields with life producing mother being the central figure of religion. “With the transition from food-gathering to food production, the female principle which continued to predominate the cults that had grown up around the mysterious forces of birth and generation was identified with Earth from whose bosom the grains sprout and was imagined as a goddess who might be influenced like women by entreaties and gifts as well as controlled by imitative rites and incantations. The Mother Goddess, thus identified with Mother Earth, Became the womb in which crops were sown”³¹¹

In the history of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, Mother Earth was personified as the mother of Narakasura³¹², the ancient ruler of Pragjyotosha. She Played a dominant role in Naraka’s life in the person of nurse katyayani and helped her son to achieve the kindom of pragjyotisha after subjugating the Kirata ruler Ghatakasura. The mother Goddess was also

³¹⁰ Manu,III-56.

³¹¹ N.N.Bhattacharya. Religious Culture of North-Eastern India.p.85

³¹² For on examination of Naraka’s episode, see Mankad: narakasura episode in the K.P., JARS.X,pp. 14-22.; Mistra: Historical notes on Narakasura and Bhagadatta, HArS,xi, PP-3-1

worshipped as Sakti cult under various names and in various forms.

6.1.4: Saktism:

Since early times, Kamarupa was well known as the major centre of Sakti-worship. Some scholars are of the opinion that the origin of Saktism and Tantricism is the North-eastern India, particularly Assam and Bengal³¹³. Scholars believe that because of the predominance of matriarchal civilization among some of the tribal people of ancient Assam, many Gods and Goddesses belonging to the Sakti cult had their origin in ancient *Kamarupa*³¹⁴. Saktism has been defined by Sir Charles Eliot as the worship of “a goddess of many names and forms, who is adored with sexual rites and the sacrifice of animals, or when the law permits of men”³¹⁵. The archeological and literary records show that Saktism occupied a prominent place in the religious history of Assam³¹⁶. Specific reference to the worship of Sakti in Kamarupa occur in the DP, KP and YT. The reference to the temple of Sri Kamesvara-Maha-Gauri is mentioned in the grants of Vanamala Vermadeva³¹⁷ of ninth century and Indrapala³¹⁸ of eleventh century A.D. During the 10th-11th centuries A.D., since the time of the composition of the KP. Saktism became the most potent form in *Kamarupa*³¹⁹. Not only in ancient Assam, but also through the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, however seemed to be Saktism³²⁰.

³¹³ M. Neog, *Purani Asamiya Samai aru Sanskrit*, p.15; Gail, *A History of Assam*, p.59

³¹⁴ B.K. Barua, *Asamiya Bahsa aru Sanskrit*, p.180.

³¹⁵ Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism. I, Intro.*, p. XXXVi.

³¹⁶ P.C. Choudhury, *The History of the Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.*, pp.418-422.

³¹⁷ *Tezpur Grant of Vanamala*, V.30.

³¹⁸ Guwakuchi grant of Indrapala, VV.49,52.

³¹⁹ K.P., chap.78, -140.

³²⁰ B.K. Bauria, *A Cultural History of Assam*, p.167.

Traditionally the Skta cult is considered to have its centre in Kamarupa with its chief temple at *Kamakhya* and its worship was associated with Tantricism, complicated rituals, mantras, mudras, mysterious syllables, mystic diagrams, etc³²¹. The temple of *Kamakhya* on the *Nilachala* hill is still considered to be the most sacred of the *Sakta pithas*, being the place where Sati's genital organ is said to have fallen and thus being the center of *yonis worship*. Though the Devi is imagined in her various forms in Sakta cult, it is mother form of incarnation of the Devi, which comes first and in Yogini-rantra, too, goddess *Kamakhya* appears as the mother or as *Bhagavati*, This Mother goddess *Kamakhya* appears as the symbol of the Creative power at the *Kamakhya* temple. According to the KP, when *Narakasura* founded a kingdom in early Assam he established himself as the custodian of this *yonis-goddess* and made her the presiding deity of the state³²². In the KP Goddess *Kamakhya* had been given the super importance among the deities of *pragjyotisha Kamarupa*. A verse in the KP states that “*anyatra virala devi Kamarupa grhe ghre*”³²³ (*Devi rare in other places is a household deity in Kamarupa*). About her influence Dr. *Kakati* writes, “It was under her banner that the first empire in early Assam was built. It was over her emergence and recognition as the presiding deity of the state that the *Saivites* and the *Vaishnavites* went into silent conflict and *Naraka*, the first builder of the state lost his life³²⁴. Even the name *Kamarupa* had been associated with the name of the *Goddess kamakhya*. Late religious history of Assam also centered round her and other Goddesses were recognized as her varied manifestations. It is *Goddess Kamakya* who was worshipped in her virgin form as *Tripura-sundari*³²⁵ dreadful conception known as *Tamresvari* or *kecai-Khat* (eater of raw flesh) in this way all the local and independent deities such as *Ugratara*, *Ekajata*, *Uma*, *Kali*, *Karala*, *Cmunda* etc. came to be regarded as manifestations of

³²¹ Sri Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Budhis*. Vol III, p.275

³²² *kamakyapujanrato nilakuta mahagirau* (K.P. chap.38.153

³²³ KP.Ch.58.42.

³²⁴ B.K. Kakati, *Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, p.33

³²⁵ Kalicharan Das, ‘*Asamar Dharma aru Darsan*’, *Asam Gaurav*. p.137

Kamakhya in different circumstances³²⁶. In this connection passing reference may here be made to the virgin-worship, Kumara-Pura, which was once so prevalent in the province and is still in existence, which is held during the day of Mahastami of Durga puja.³²⁷

Later on during the days of liberal Vaisnava religion propagated by Sankardeva, though the intensity of Devi worship witnessed much decline, but Saktism has dominated over the mind of people over the ages in such a way that even in the present days people use to worship Shakti in the form of *Durga*, *kali* and *lakshmi* during autumn in a big festive mood and as symbol of the Devi, every household in Assam install a 'ghata' during the period of Dura puja. Other than Saktism, the different faiths existed in the Assamese society were: Savisim, Vaisnavism, Solar cuti, Buddhism, etc.

6.4.5; Saivism:

Saivism prevailed in Kamarupa since the remote period and several scholars suggested that in Assam, Saivism had more ancient roots than *Sakta* religion in Assam. Saivism was popular among the aboriginals and the Aryanized people. The different manifestations of Siva and his worship in ancient *Kamarupa* are evident from mythological literature and inscriptions. The KP states that before the introduction of Devi worship in *Kamarupa* by Narakasura, Siva secretly preserved *Kamrupa* as his own territory and was recognized as the guardian deity of the land³²⁸. Even during the reign of Naraka, Siva was then privately worshipped by the earlier inhabitants of the country³²⁹. After Naraka was Deposed, Saivism again came into prominence. The Parasites of ancient Assam invoked

³²⁶ B.K.Barua, *A cultural history of Assam*.p.168

³²⁷ B.K. Kakati, *Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, chap.iv.pp.35-70

³²⁸ Chap.38.96.*Sa ca desah svarajyarthe purvam guptasca sambhuna.*

³²⁹ KP.chap.38.96.*Sambhu rantargupthah as ma pure.*

Siva by various names such as: Maheswara³³⁰, Adideva³³¹, Mahadeva³³², Mahavaraha³³³, prajadhinatha³³⁴, Sambhy³³⁵, Pasupati³³⁶, Isa³³⁷, Pinakpani³³⁸, Rudra³³⁹, Hetuka-Sulin³⁴⁰, Gauripati³⁴¹, Hara³⁴², kameavara³⁴³, padmanatha³⁴⁴, kitava³⁴⁵, Ardhanrisvara³⁴⁶, Paramamaheavara³⁴⁷, and the like.

People usually worship Siva in his *Linga* form. The *Linga* is a straight pillar of stone erected on a pedestal, symbolic of the female reproductive organ, called yoni. P.C. Choudhury states that the cult of *Linga* worship is associated with the pre-Aryan element and considers that the word *linga* is derived from Austric origin³⁴⁸. The *yogini-tantra*³⁴⁹ states that there were a million *lingas* in *Kamarupa*.

Siva was also worshipped in various tribal customs. It has been found that Kosh Kings of Cooch Behar worshipped Siva by the sacrifices of swine, pigeons, buffaloes, He-goats, ducks and cocks etc. and by offering rice and liquor and the deodhai dance of women³⁵⁰. In certain Siva-temples like those of Umananda, Kamaesvara, Siddhesvara, Amratakesvara,

³³⁰ Doobi grant.v.55,Nidhanpur grant.v.2

³³¹ Subhankarapataka Grant,v.1, Khonamukhi grant, v.1

³³² Grant of Vallabhadeva,v.13

³³³ Gauhati grant of Indrapala,

³³⁴ Gauhati grant of Indrapala

³³⁵ Gauhati grant of Indrapala, v.10.

³³⁶ Gauhati grant of Indrapala, vv.1-2.

³³⁷ Nowgong grant, v.8.

³³⁸ Doobi grant,v.1, Tezpur grant.v.,2

³³⁹ Nowgong grant, v.1

³⁴⁰ Tezpur grant, v.24

³⁴¹ Grant of Vallabhadeva

³⁴² Bargain grant

³⁴³ Tezpur grant, Guakuchi grant.

³⁴⁴ kamauli grant, v.26

³⁴⁵ Gauhati grant, v.1

³⁴⁶ khonamukhi grant, v.1, Subhankarapataka grant, v.1

³⁴⁷ Tezpur Rock Inscription, line-2

³⁴⁸ P.C. Choudhury. *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.C.*, p. 413.

³⁴⁹ *Kotilingasamakirna Kamakhya Kalpavallari*, YT,Bk,1, chap.11.36.

³⁵⁰ Darrang Rajvamsavali,pp.324-28: M.Neog, *Purani Asomiya samaj aru samskriti*,p.10

etc., the practice of animal sacrifice is still in vogue on the occasion of Siva Calurdasi. Though Vaisnavism took the leading seat in Assam in the medieval period and Sankardeva and Madhavdeva was the main person behind the liberal vaisnavism in Assam, but there is enough references and informations about Siva worship in the family of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva³⁵¹.

6.1.6: Vaisnavism:

Assam was a stronghold of Vaishnavism faith, besides Saktism and Saivism. The origin of Vishnu in Assam is uncertain, but the history of Assam begins with the birth of Narakasura through the Boar incarnation of Vishnu and all the ancient rulers of Kamarupa claims to trace their lineage from Vishnu through Naraka. The KP also describes in detail about the worship of Vishnu-Vasudeva with rituals and mentions as many as five incarnation of the deity (Hayagriya, Fish incarnation, Pandunath, the Boar incarnation and Vasudeva-krana) as being worshipped in different places of Assam³⁵².

The worship of Vishnu and his incarnations is also proved by epigraphy. The earliest recorded reference to the worship of Vishnu in Kamarupa occurs in the Badaganga Rock inscription (554 A.D.), where the king Mahabhutivaram had been called as “Parama daivata parama bhagavta”³⁵³.

Evidence based on architectural and sculptural remains also prove the existence of the Valsnava faith during the ancient period.

³⁵¹ KGC pp.16-21, 143; M.Neog, *Purani Asamiya Samaj aru Samskriti* p. 12,13.

³⁵² *K.P*, chap. 78.80.88.

³⁵³ Bordaganga Rock, Inscription, :*Lincet* 1-2

Some of the important sculpture remains are a ninth century A.D. image of Vishnu found near Deopani of Golagaht, an eleventh-twelfth century A.D. bell metal image of Vishnu collected from an old temple from a place adjacent to Dibrugarh, the twelfth century image of Vishnu in his eternal sleep found in Asvakranta temple, the eighth-ninth century image Sukresvara at Suklesvar, the seventh-eighth century image of Venu-Gopala carved in stone in the western entrance to the Kamakhya temple, etc.³⁵⁴.

Vaishnavism was initiated in its new form by Sri Sankardeva and his colleagues based on Bhagavata Purana during 15th-16th centuries. Vaishnavism exerted its influence upon the people to a great extent and became the main cult of Assam during the whole of the medieval period. Sankardeva introduced Vaishnavism in a liberal form, where the people of all castes and social status (place of religious association) sprang throughout the whole region. All the Hindu inhabitants from Brahmana down to the lower caste of the society could enter into the namghars and Satras. In Vaisnava faith, women were seen in high esteem. Morality and chastity were considered as precious ornaments of women. Vaishnavism advised women not to mix with other male persons freely. They should cover their body from head to foot with cloth so that nobody could see any part of their body³⁵⁵.

6.1.7: Solar cult

Sun worship prevailed in Assam from very early times, which is proved by literature and architectural remains. The prevalence of the cult is proved by the existing remains of temples dedicated to the sun and many icons of the deity, found in Dah Parvatia, Gahpur, Sualkuchi, Mangaldoi, Tezpur, Pandu Sadiya,

³⁵⁴ Arunima Bharali, *Assamese culture*, p.19

³⁵⁵ *KGc*, pp.609,610.

Sukresvara. Suryyapahar and other places of this ancient land³⁵⁶. The antiquity of the cult is indicated by the very name 'Pragjyotisha'. The earliest reference to *Pragjyotisha* as a centre of sun worship is found in the *Grha Sutras* and some *Puranas* and further provides evidence for it³⁵⁷. The KP mentions that the Sri *Suryya pahar*. In Goalpara was the perpetual abode of the sun: (*yatra deva adityah satatam stitah*). It also refers to the *Citrasaila* where the *navagrahas* or nine planets were worshipped³⁵⁸. According to Taranatn, the people of *Kamrupa* were formerly worshippers of the sun prior to the introduction of Buddhism by Dhritika, who had to convert the people from sun worship to Buddhism under the pretence that he was a follower of the solar cult³⁵⁹.

6.1.8: Buddhism:

Buddhism flourished in *Kamarupa* at some previous period of its history. P.C. Choudhury also remarks, "Long before Yuan Chwanh's visit, there were traces of the faith in the land"³⁶⁰. He further remarks that Ynanbhadra, Jinayadas and Yasogupta, the three Buddhist monks who worked in China in 6th century B.C. were from Eastern India, probably from *Kamarupa*³⁶¹. Kalhana mentions about Amritaprabha, who was the daughter of the *kamarupa* king of probably 5th century A.D. She was married to maghavahana of Kashmir, She took to Kashmir a tibeta Buddhist guru of her father, called Stunpa and the latter

³⁵⁶ P.C, Choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, p.407.

³⁵⁷ P.C. Choudhury, *the History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*,p.406.

³⁵⁸ KP,78/42;79/142.

³⁵⁹ Cited in B.K. Barua. *A cultural History of Assam*,p. 182; P.C. Choudhury. *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.,D.*,p,407

³⁶⁰ P.C. Choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, p.400.

³⁶¹ P.C. Choudhury., *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, p.402

erected a Vihara in Kashmir known as Lo Stunpa³⁶². P.C. Choudhury rightly points out. “This evidence not only points to cultural relations between Kamarupa, Tibet and Kashmir, but also seems to establish the fact that about that time Buddhism was prevalent in *Kamarupa* and was patronized by its rulers”³⁶³. Amritaprabha also erected in Kashmir a lofty vihara for the benefit of the foreign monks called Amritabhavan³⁶⁴, corrupted into Amitabhavan or Antabhavan. Other than these evidences, we find that Bhaskarvarman had a special attachment for the faith. Bhaskara’s devotion to faith becomes evident from his last request to the pilgrim Yuan Chwang to stay in his kingdom and accompany the letter to attend the Buddhist assembly at Kanauj and Prayaga³⁶⁵. The existing ruins of temples and icons of the Buddha also support the prevalence of the faith. Among the remains, there are traces of Buddhist temples only at Hajo, but also at Nilacala, Singri, Tezpur and Goalpara³⁶⁶.

6.1.9: Other Sects

Besides these major faiths other minor deities were also worshipped in Assam, but due to lack of followers, they could not represent district seats, Such Goda and Goddesses were Ganes, kartikeya, Indra, Agni Kuvera, Manasa, Brahma, etc. The existence of these seats was indicated by epigraphs and sculptures³⁶⁷. In spite of being the land of number of faiths, religious tolerance was present among the adherents of different sects. It is proved by the ruins spread in the different places of Assam, where images of different deities and

³⁶² Kalhana’s *Rajatarangni*, BK III, pp.9-10.

³⁶³ P.C.Choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*,p.402

³⁶⁴ *Rajatarangini*, BK III, p.9.

³⁶⁵ P.C. Choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.* p403.

³⁶⁶ P.C. Choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, p.403

³⁶⁷ P.C. Choudhury, *The History of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*,p428

temples dedicated to deities of different sects were erected at a single site³⁶⁸. Therefore, we can illustrate that religious harmony was present among different sects and people could freely worship the sect they believed. The religious festivals of different sects were celebrated and all the people used to participate especially women, who also put in their helpful assistance in making these festivals successful, thus contributing their share in building up the composite socio-religious fabric of ancient and medieval Assam.

6.1.10: Religious status of women of ancient Assam

From the very beginning of the civilization Assamese women were deeply religious minded and worshipped many deities. But they did not have any distinct faith or religious belief. All the religious duties and activities performed by the husband were equally shared by his wife. In the Assamese society, we do not get any direct evidence regarding the religious position of women. But comparison of the queens with different goddesses as found in the inscriptions of ancient Assam indicate that women were not only highly respected but were also sometimes given the equal status to Goddesses. Women were seen in the form of Devi from the mythological period. The KP quotes. “Every women in Kamarupa is miniature incarnation of the goddess”³⁶⁹.

6.1.11: Women compared to Goddesses:

The different inscriptions of ancient Assam compared the queens to the different Goddesses. The comeliness of most of the queens such as Dhruva-lakhmi, wife of

³⁶⁸ P.C. Choudhury, *The History of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.*, pp.431-443

³⁶⁹ KP, 60, 41

Susthitavarman of Varman dynasty³⁷⁰. Rajyadevi, wife of Indrapara of Pala dynasty³⁷¹ was compared to Goddess Lakhmi, which signified that women were considered as benevolent and bestower of prosperity. The inscriptions also praised the queens as basis of inspiration for her king husband. As in the *Vedic* period, every God was closely associated with her female counterpart and was acclaimed in different appearance, in the similar way most of the queens were admired as being the strength and the source of bringing prosperity and goodness by her fortune to the kingdoms of different kings of Varman, Salastambha and Pala dynasty. That is why in the inscriptions we find that the queens achieved the same honorable and equal status to their husbands as different Goddesses were to their God husbands. Some of the examples are: Suvrata, the queen of King Mahendrarvarman of varman dynasty was compared to Saci, the consort of Indra³⁷². Devamati, queen of king Narayanavarman of Carman dynasty was given the same status by her husband as Goddess Lakhmi was given by her husband God Narayana³⁷³. Nayanadevi, the queen of Sthitavarman of Varman dynasty was as important and beloved to her king husband as Saci was to Indra and Goddess Durga was to Lord Siva³⁷⁴. Durlabha was said to be suitable consort for king Purandarapala of Pala dynasty as Saci was to Indra, Parvati was to Siva, Rati was to kamadeva, Lakshmi was to Vishnu and Rohini was to Moon³⁷⁵. Status of Ratna fir her king husband Harsapala of Pala dynasty was similar to the status of lord Siva's wife Parvati³⁷⁶. As Guri was a beloved wife to Sambhu and Lakshmi was to Visnu, likewise Monorama was adorable and virtuous to her Brahmin husband named Vishnu³⁷⁷. The merit,

³⁷⁰ *KP*,v,60

³⁷¹ *Hayunthul copper plate of Harijaravarman, last line;Tezpur copper plate of Vanamala, vv, 13,15; Prbatiya copperplates of Harjaravarman, vv.13-15*

³⁷² *Dubi Copper plate of Bhaskarvarman, v.24.*

³⁷³ *Dubi Copper plate of Bhaskarvarman, v.27.*

³⁷⁴ *Dubi Copper plate of Bhaskarvarman, v.50.51*

³⁷⁵ *Dubi Copper plate of Bhaskarvarman, v.14*

³⁷⁶ *Khonamukhi copperplate of Dharmapala, v11*

³⁷⁷ *Khonamukhi copperplate of Dharmapala, v20*

Chastity and character of Pauka, the wife of Barata Brahmin were compared to Rohini, consort of Moon and Parvati, consort of Siva³⁷⁸.

The inscriptions of ancient Assam also points towards the high regard the high regard paid to the women as mother. The principle of motherhood was firmly belived in ancient and medieval Assam and she was worshiooed in the form of Goddess. The exceptional degree of reverence paid to motherhood can be seen in the inscriptions. Where mothers were regarded as the source of inspiration for their sons. For instance, yajnavati was described as sacrificial fire for her son Mahendravarman of Varman dynasty³⁷⁹. Motherhood of Survata, mother of King narayanavarma of Varman dynasty was compare to Aditi, mother of Indra³⁸⁰. Mothers were praised for giving birth to brave sons. Like Parvati who gave birth to karttikeya, Queen Devamti gave birth and brought up king Mahabhutivarma of Varman dynasty who was compared to Parvati (mother ofKarttikeya, destroyer of the enemies), Aditi (mother of protector of the three wolds, i.e., Visnu) and Devaki (mother of lord Krishna, the enemy of the demons)³⁸¹. Motherhood of Anuradha, wife of Vasudeva Brahmin and that of mother of devadeva Brahmin was compared to motherhood of Devaki, mother of Lord Krishna³⁸². It is clear from the inscriptions that women were not only considered as equal half of their husbands but also highly regarder as images of different Goddesses.

6.1.12: Devadasi System

We get references from inscriptions and literary sources that some of the virgin women dedicated their whole life in the name of God by becoming devadasis. An early reference to *devadesis* is made by the Tezpur grant of Vanamala (V.24).

³⁷⁸ *Subhankarpataka copperplate of Dharmapala*, v.19

³⁷⁹ *Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskarman*, v.12

³⁸⁰ *Dubi Copper plate of Bhaskarmarman*, v.16

³⁸¹ *Dubi Copper plate of Bhaskarmarman*, v.227,28,29

³⁸² *Guwakuchi copperplate of Indrapala*,v.24

6.1.14: Women as Medhi and religious heads

Women in the medieval period became aware in religious discourses, by reading the religious books. Chandari, the nurse of Sankardeva was quite acquainted with the teachings of the *Gita* and could also take part in theological discussions³⁸⁸. Dayal, wife of Teli-Krsna Atai was a favourite disciple of Badula Ata, one of the prominent Vaisnavita preceptors of the latter part of Vaisnavita movement³⁸⁹. The wife of Narayan Thakur, popularly known as Thakur Ata was a dedicated Vaisnava supporter with a great religious bent of mind and women of great intelligence³⁹⁰. Some of the women rose to such a height of learning and devotion that they succeeded in acquiring the *Medhi* and headship of religious sects of institutions. Amongst such women, mention may be made of Dayal who was appointed as *Medhi* or instructor to teach all the one hundred and twenty queens of the King Laksmi Narayana the procedure of recital of God's name at different intervals of the day and the reading of the holy books such as Ghosa, Krittana, Bhaggavata etc.³⁹¹. Some of the women such as Ai-Kanaklata, the grand daughter of Harideva, guided the destiny of their respective sub-sects with considerable success and efficiency³⁹². Before his death, Harideva, the founder preceptor of the Haridevi sect bestowed the duty of incharge of his Satra and Dharma-mala on his learned daughter Bhubaneswari. She was the first woman to lead a religious sect in Assam and since then women began to exercise their influence in the domain of religion in Assam³⁹³. The religious fervor of some of the queens resulted in construction of temples.

³⁸⁸ KGC, pp.116,36

³⁸⁹ KGC, pp.523,585

³⁹⁰ KGC, pp.425-426

³⁹¹ KGC, pp.523,585

³⁹² S.B.Sarma, The New-Vaisnavite movement and Satra institution of Assam, p.89

³⁹³ N.N.Basu, Social History of Kamrupa, Vol,II, pp.148-149

6.1.15: Temples and tanks by Queens

Queen Phuleswari excavated a tank called Gaurisagar tank near the capital city and on its bank, she erected three temples dedicated to Siva. Vishnu and Devi. Siva Singha's second queen Draupadi, who was also Phuleswari's sister, excavated the biggest tank called Suvasagar tank in the capital city at Rangpur and she also constructed three temples dedicated to Siva. Vishnu and Devi on its bank. This Siva temple with its large gold-covered dome is the biggest and the tallest of the temples in Assam, Queens not only constructed temples and sacred tanks, but their authority could be noticed over the religion of the kingdom.

6.1.12: Religious Zeal of Queen Phuleswari:

Queen Phuleswari was a great devotee of Saktism and tried to make it the state religion. But her passion as Saktism created great danger for the existence of the Ahom kingdom. She forced the *Dudra Mahantas* to bow down their heads before the goddess Durga in a *Sakta* shrine and compelled them to besmear their foreheads with the blood of the sacrificed animals and made them accept nirmali and prasad³⁹⁴. The Maomariyas, especially the powerful Mayamara Mahanta considered it as great insult³⁹⁵, and from that day Maomariya turned into enemies of the Ahom kingdom, which resulted in Maomariya rebellion, which was the most important factor for the downfall of Ahom kingdom. Nevertheless. She could guess that her interference in the matter of religion had caused such a detrimental effect to the interest to the state. However, queen Phuleswari was a great patron of literature and Sanskrit education. She started a Sanskrit school within the palace campus³⁹⁶.

³⁹⁴ ABHB.p.71

³⁹⁵ ABHB.p.71

³⁹⁶ S.L. Baruah, *A comprehensive history of Assam*,p.295

Queens and upper class women of Assamese Society were educated and they showed their interest in the field of education by patronizing poets and writers.

6.2: RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

In Islam, there is no difference between men and women's relationship to God; they receive identical rewards and punishments for their conduct³⁹⁷.

According to saying attributed to Muhammad, women are allowed to go to mosques.³⁹⁸ However, as Islam spread, it became unusual for women to worship in mosques because of fears of unchastity caused by interaction between sexes; this condition persisted until the late 1960s³⁹⁹. Since then, women have become increasingly involved in the mosque, though men and women generally worship separately⁴⁰⁰. (Muslims explain this by citing the need to avoid distraction during prayer prostrations that raise the buttocks while the forehead touches the ground. Separation between sexes ranges from men and women on opposite sides of an aisle, to men in front of women (as was the case in the time of Muhammad), to women in second-floor balconies or separate rooms accessible by a door for women only⁴⁰¹.

In Islam's earlier history, female religious scholars were relatively common. Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a Sunni religious scholar, has compiled biographies of 8,000 female jurists, and orientalist Ignaz Goldziher earlier

³⁹⁷ *Equality of Men and women in all Three Levels of Islam.*

³⁹⁸ "Do not stop Allah's women-slave from going to Allah's Mosques." (Sahih al-Bukhari, 2:13:23.)

³⁹⁹ Mattson, Ingrid, "Women, Islam, and Mosques." In *Encyclopedia of Women And Religion in North America* (Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, ed.). Indiana university Press (2006), p616. ISBN 0-253-34688-6.

⁴⁰⁰ Mattson, Ingrid, "Women, Islam, and Mosques." In *Encyclopedia of Women And Religion in North America* (Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, ed.). Indiana university Press (2006), p616-17. ISBN 0-253-34688-6.

⁴⁰¹ Smith, Jane L. *Islam in America*. Columbia University Press (200): p111. ISBN 0-231-10967-9.

estimated that 15 percent of medieval habit scholars were women. After the 16th century, however, female scholars became fewer⁴⁰². And today - while female activists and writers are relatively common - there has not been a significant female jurist in over 200 years⁴⁰³. Opportunists for women's religious education exist, but cultural barriers often keep women from pursuing such a vocation.

Women's right to become imams, however, is disputed by many. A fundamental role of an imam (religious leader) in a mosque is to lead the salah (congregational prayers). Generally, women are not allowed to lead mixed prayers. However, some argue that Muhammad gave permission to Ume Warqa to lead a mixed prayer at the mosque of Dar⁴⁰⁴.

Hui women are self-aware of their relative freedom and Chinese women in the context of the status of Arab women in countries like Saudi Arabia where Arab women are restricted and forced to wear encompassing clothing. Hui women point out these restrictions as "low status", and feel better to be Chinese than to be Arab, claiming that it is Chinese women's advanced knowledge of the Quran which enables them to have equality between men and women.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰² Power, Carla, "A Secret History." *New York Times* (February 25, 2007)

⁴⁰³ Khaled Abou El Fadl. "In Recognition of women." *The modern religion.com*. Originally Published (in a slightly different form) in the *Mainaret* (July/Aug 1991)

⁴⁰⁴ Javed Ahmed Ghamidi, *Religious leadership of women in Islam*, April 24, *Daily Times*, Pakistan

⁴⁰⁵ Maria Jaschok, Jingjun Shui (Routledge, 2000) *The history of women's mosques in Chinese Islam: a mosque of their own*.

6.2.1: Sufi female mystics

The Islamic mystic movement known as Sufism is believed to have been created by a female holy woman, Rabiah al- Basri (d.801). She created the doctrine of "disinterested love of God"⁴⁰⁶.

Sufi Islam teaches the doctrine of tariqa, meaning following a spiritual path in daily living habits, To support followers of this concept, separate institutions for men(ta'ifa, hizb, rabita) and women (khanqa, rabita, derga) were created. Initiates to these groups pursued a progression of seven stages of spiritual discipline, called makamat(stations) or ahwal(spiritual states) ⁴⁰⁷.

6.2.3: Current female religious scholars

There are a number of prominent female Islamic scholars. They generally focus on questioning gender -based interpretations of the Quran, the traditions of the prophet and early Islamic history. Some notable Muslim women scholars are Azizah al Hilbri, Anima Wadud-Muhsin, Fatima Mernissi, Fiffat Hassan, Laila Ahmed, Aisha Abdul-Rahman and Merryal Wyn Davies⁴⁰⁸.

But this a matter of fact that in Mediaval Assam Though the Muslim women had enjoyed the religious right to make them pious, to preapare them for going to Zannat, they did not received the right to go to the mosques. It was due to the lack of proper knowledge on islam and more predominantly due to the social Nature of patriachiacal domination.

⁴⁰⁶ Ziauddin Sardar Zafar Abbas Malik (2009) Islam: graphic guide. Totem. P 93. ISBN 9781848310841.

⁴⁰⁷ Chebel Malek (2009) L'islam explique par Malek Chabel. Perrin. p. 138. ISBN 978226029821.

⁴⁰⁸ Ziauddin Sardar and Zafar Abbas Malik (2009) Islam: A graphic guied. Totem. Pp.160-2. ISBN 9781848310841.

No women sufi saints are seen in Assam so far. Still in the family and society Muslim women enjoyed peaceful religious life.

6.3: RELIGIOUS RIGHT OF TRIBAL WOMEN

In the tribal society of Northeast India. The traditional religious is Animism, spirits of ancestors and nature. They believe in one supreme God is known in different tribes by different names such as Pathian among the Mizos, Raagung among the Nagas, Pantheon among the Garos, U Blei Nong- Thaw among the khasi's pala konwar among the hill Lalungs. The tribal people do not have any idol or place of worship. They believe in good and evil spirits and other godheads dwelling in the rocks, forest, groves, streams and rivers. They have fear of the infinite and have respect for nature. From this arose the practice of ceremonial offerings and sacrifices. The tribal people worship evil spirit also in order to save themselves for certain sickness like mania, ill luck and variety of other calamities. There are also other rituals, ceremonies, prayers, incantations, taboos, genus that are performed by the different tribes to have religious, moral and philosophical life, to prolong life, to ward off evil, to obtain children and to destroy or harass sworn enemies. In earlier days, the tribal people use to please their gods and goddesses by offering human sacrifices. Nowadays, however, fowls or other animals take the place of human victim⁴⁰⁹. The hill lalungs has thans (shrines) for the gods. Other deities are Botolmaji, Moraniuji, Rungshu Konwari, Sumai, Mora, Lukhumu (Goddess Lakshmi). In addition, each clan has its clan gods called khul devata⁴¹⁰. The household deities of the Kacharis are Bathaubrai or old Bathu, Mainao or Bhulli Buri, Asu Mainao, Sali Mainao, Song Raja, Song Brai, Bura Bagh Raja, etc and the village deities of the Kacharis are Mero raja,

⁴⁰⁹ *Playfair, the Garos*, p. 103: Birendra Kumar Gohain, *The Hill Lulungs*. P61

⁴¹⁰ Birendra Kumar Gohain. *The Hill Lalungs*, p.61

Bura Mahadeo, Bura's gosain, Jal kuber, Thal Kuber, Bih Kuber, Kuber Brui, Sila Rai etc.⁴¹¹. The main religion of the Mishings of the Assam as Kewalia or Kalhanghati or Nishamila.

They are mainly worshippers of Uyu or spirit and their main god is Donyee-Po: lo(The sun and the Moon)⁴¹². The dimasas worship six goods. They are Shivrey, Alufaja, Naikhurraja, Woaraja, Gunyung, Braiyung and Hamiadao⁴¹³. They also worship the evil spirit during any disease or when a misfortune befalls them. The Garos believe in the existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits, commonly called Mite⁴¹⁴, The principal Mites, who are worshipped by the (Jaros, are 'Tatara-Rabunga, Saljong, Nostu- Nopantu, Chrabodi, Goera, Kalkame, Susime, Asima-Dingsima, Jimgrengma and Nowang. Besides they also worship the sun and Moon. The spirits worshipped by the khasis and Syntengs are U'lei muluk , U'lei Umtong, U'lei longspah, U Ryngkew or U Basu shnong, U phun U Kyrpad, Ka Rih, Ka, Khlam, Ka, Duba, ka taroh ,etc⁴¹⁵. Besides they also worship natural beings and ancestors. The Mizos mainly worship supernatural beings. The most important ones are Pu Vana (God of nature) Vanchuung Nula (Goddess of rains) , Vanhrika(God of science and learning) khua-nu(mother of nature, Ramhuai or Phung(Ghosts) Lasi (Angels), etc⁴¹⁶ .

The tribes of Arunachal are divided in to three Zones on the basis of socio-religious afinities⁴¹⁷. The first group of tribes professes Buddhism. They are the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Members, Khambas, Khamptis and Singphos.

⁴¹¹ S Endle, *the Kacharis*. pp.35-39

⁴¹² Jatin Mipun, *The Mishings of Assam*. Pp 25-26

⁴¹³ Dipali G. Dunda, *Among the Dimasas of Assam* ,pp126-131

⁴¹⁴ Playfair, *The Garos*, p 80.

⁴¹⁵ P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Mizos*, pp 26-27

⁴¹⁷ L.B. Thanga, *The Mizos*, pp 26-27

⁴¹⁸ N.N. Osik, *A brief History of Arunachal Pradesh*, pp.7-8

The second group consists of tribes like the Akas, Khowas, Mijis, Bangnis, Solungs, Nishis, Aptanis, Hill Miri's, Tagins, Adis, Mishmis, etc., who worship the sun and Moon God, namely Donyi Polo. The third group comprises the Wanchos and the Notes, who are associated with the cut of head hunting. The religious rituals of all the tribes largely coincide with the phases of agriculture cycles. They also invoke natural deities and make animal sacrifices. Except among the Miji Wancho, Nocte and Aka tribes, women of all other tribes, of Arunachal Pradesh are allowed to act even as priests provided they have sufficient knowledge of the procedure of the different religious ceremonies⁴¹⁸. The Manipurians are presently Hindu Vaishnavas. But before the introduction of Vaishnavism, they had a separate religion of their own called "Maiba, the maibas used to worship many kinds of gods. The main gods were Lamlai, Umanglai and Imunglai and ancestors of each tribe. Other deities were Panthoibi, Sanamahi, Noongshabu, Yunuhailai, etc⁴¹⁹. At present the Manipurians are found to be the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which was preached till the time of Jai Singha⁴²⁰.

6.4: Conclusion

Thus it has been observed that women enjoyed a good position in respect to the religious matters in the history of Medieval Assam.

⁴¹⁸ Status of women in tribal society : Arunachal Pradesh, by B.B. Pandey.

⁴¹⁹ Jyotirmoy Roy, History of Manipur, pp107

⁴²⁰ Sipra Sen, tribes and Castes p.28