CHAPTER -III
ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF
THE TWO TRIBES- THE RABHAS
AND THE GAROS
CHAPTER III
ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE TWO TRIBES-
THE RABHAS AND THE GAROS

3.1 THE RABHAS

The Rabha-speaking community belongs to the Tibeto-Burman stock of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese family. The tribe is a branch of the Boro group which also includes besides the Rabha, the Garo, the Tiwa, the Dimasa, the Hill Tippera, The Mech and so forth. To find out the little known origin, the ethnic identity and the history of the migration of the Rabhas, a great deal of research is still required. Scholars and researchers have expressed different opinions regarding the origin of the Rabhas. According to Waddle (1900): “the Rabhas are the off shoot of the Kachari tribe”. Dalton holds that “the Rabha customs, with the exception of the laws of inheritance and marriage, resemble those of the Garos or those of the Panikoches” (Dalton, E.T.: “Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, India Studies past and present”. Calcutta 1872, page 87). Allen is of the opinion that “The Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appears to be an offshoot of the Garos” (Allen, B.C.: “Assam District Gazetteers, 1905, vol.III, Page-49). Gait said “there seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what the people really are. In lower Assam it is asserted that they are an offshoot of the Garos- while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kocharis on the roads of Hinduism: that they belong to the great Bodo family is certain.” (Gait, Sir Edward: “Census of India, 1891, Vol. I, Reprint Pt.-II, page-232). According to Playfair, “it appears that the Rabhas occupied the Garo Hills wherefrom they came down to the plains. That their original habitat was the region bordering the northern slopes of the Garo hills is also supported by the fact that certain section of the tribe which live on the borders of that district, have no words for the north and the south but describe the former by the word ‘Bhota-hi-
chue' or Bhutan and the later by 'Tura', the district headquarter of Garo Hills. (Playfair, 1909 (reprint 1975): "The Garos", page-19). To sum up, it seems that the Mongoloid people came in successive waves from the north and the northeastern region; they had partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Austroloid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabhas and the Garos etc. The Indo-Aryan Strain appears to have entered Assam along with the spread of the cult of Brahmanism and contribute to the racial makeup of its inhabitants. (Das, B.M: “The Ethnic Affinities of the Rabhas”, 1960, p 4). It is observed that the migration of the Rabhas had taken place from the Tibetan region to the Brahmaputra valley and then to the hills of Assam. There is a legend current among the Garos that when Hashong was the chief of the powerful Atong clan, he brought the Rabhas into the Someswari Valley to till the land, because at the time the Garos, being nomads, were not acquainted with the more settled methods of husbandry. Afterwards, when Brakman, the minister of Hashong treacherously slew his master and seized the supreme power, a period of bloodshed and anarchy followed and the Rabhas were driven out from the valley. (Bora, M: Folklore and Folklife of the Pati Rabhas; a case study of Kamrup and Goalpara District of Assam, unpublished Ph.D thesis, GU-1988)

The word "Rabha" seems to have been derived from the word ‘Rabha”, which means “to bring”. Since the Rabhas were brought to earth by their Risi, the supreme God, from the Rongkrang i.e. heaven, they are called Raba or Rabha. Secondly, since Dadan, the traditional hero of the Rabhas brought them apart from the others; they began to call themselves Rabhas.

The Rabhas are one of the plains tribes of Assam. They are mostly concentrated in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Darrang and Sonitpur. The Rabhas have some pockets in Meghalaya, West Bengal, Nepal, and Bangladesh. But their main concentration is only found on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. In the opinion of Grierson, the term “Rabha” is a Hindu name of the Kacharis.
The Rabhas belong to the great Bodo group of the Mongoloid race. Major Playfair believes that after migration from the Tibetan region they settled in the Garo Hills region, now a part of the state of Meghalaya, and from there they spread over to different regions of Assam. Hodson observed that culturally and linguistically the Rabhas are more akin to the Garos (Bordoloi et al, 1987, p.119). Sir E.A. Gait identifies the Rabhas as two distinct ethnic groups and says they are called Totlas and sometimes Datiyal Kacharis in the undivided district of Darrang (p.120).

The Rabhas no doubt have cultural similarities and also ethnic affinity with a number of ethnic groups; and these similarities have been marked by different persons during different period of time. Dalton on the other hand, treated Rabhas as the branch of the Kachari race having connection with the Garos (1972:87). Endle (1911:83) and Waddel (1900:65) had seen their affinity with the Kachari (Datiyal or Border Kachari). Allen’s view was that Rabhas were a section of the Bodos and appeared to be an offshoot of the Garo (1903:49). Their similarities with the Garos had also been marked by Playfair (1909:9-20). He also believed that the Atongs and Rugas (division of the Garos) had a common origin with the Rabhas and the Koches. Gait in connection with the affinity of this people states,

There seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what these people really are. In lower Assam it is asserted that they are an off-shoot of the Garos while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kacharis on the road to Hinduism. That they belong to the great Bodo family is certain, but it is not equally clear that the Rabhas are more closely allied to any one tribe of that group than to another. On the whole, therefore, although some Kacharis and Garos may have become Rabhas just as others have become Koches, it seems probable that the Rabhas in reality are a distinct tribe”

(1891:232)

Allen also reports, “The rank of the Rajbongshi is recruited from the aboriginal tribes such as Mech, Rabha and Kachari…” (1905:39). Dr. B.M. Das in
one of his works had scientifically established the fact that the Rabhas were more closely allied to the Garos rather than any other tribe of the Bodo group. Dr. Das further supported the view expressed by E.A. Gait that the Rabhas were ethnically and culturally a distinct tribe. He said "...it seems probable that Mongoloid people came in successive waves from the north and north-eastern region. They have partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Austrolooid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabha, the Garo, etc.

3.1.1 *Khel* (sub-group or sect) or *Faid* (lineage, 'gotro')

Upen Rabha Hakacham in one of his article\(^1\) mentioned that Rabhas are mainly divided into eight different *Khel* or sub-groups. Out of these three Non-Aryan groups still hold on to their language which are as follows *Maistoria, Rongdania* and *Chonga (Kocha Rabha, Koch, Chunga)*. Those groups which forgot their language completely are five Aryan groups i.e. *Pati, Dahari, Bitoliya, Totla and Hana*. These five Aryan *Khels* (sub-groups) use *Lemakatha* i.e. Rabhamiz (Rabha+ Assamese) at their homes to express themselves. Moreover depending on characteristics features such as generosity, brutality, stupidity, politeness, merciless, popularity, decency, laziness, lethargic, addicted, well-mannered, people were observed and neighbours, researchers and religious *Gurus* gave them names like *Saraniya, madahi, Dhimali, Kachari, Haluwa* etc and subsequently Rabhas got special identity according to these special features or characteristics.

According to Bhubin Rabha\(^2\), Rabhas are divided into 9 different *Khel* or *faid* (sub-groups). There is a history regarding this division which is as follows-

Dadan was the chief king among Rabhas. He made arrangement for *Baikho* or *Khoksi Puja* (worshipping) at a place called *Athiyabari*. His soldiers took part in it. *Baikho* was the goddess of agriculture and kings who used to

---

depend on agriculture, arranged for this puja. King used to divide work among all the people related to the puja. From then onwards depending on the nature of their work different khel or faid were named. Before that there was no division among Rabhas.

1. **Maitori** - this khel or faid is entrusted with the job of preparing food and distributing it. Mae means rice, and tori means to distribute. So this group is called maitoria.

2. **Rongdania**: Rong means stone dan means to carry it in Khowadh puja. This puja was held in the clear area nearby forest, so to make the altar and to make sitting arrangement, stones are needed. People who were given the responsibility of bringing stones for the above mentioned purposes were called Romgdania.

3. **Dahari**: Dahari means long bamboo. Puja used to be organized at secluded places. So different kinds of birds used to come at that place. One group of people was given the duty of dispersing these birds with the help of these long bamboos. Thus they were called Dahari.

4. **Chunga**: to keep wine and water, bamboo tube with one end closed is required. The group responsible for bringing bamboo tube got named as Chunga.

5. **Pati**: Bhog (food to be offered to deity) to be offered to deity and to devotee after the puja was offered necessitated leaves of a particular type. Those people who were entrusted with cutting the leaves of trees and arranging for those for distribution of bhog are called Pati.

6. **Bitoliya**: After Puja and offerings were over, there were a section of people who used to entertain the gathering with humorous talk. These people who used to spread humour are called Bitoliya.

7. **Koch**: In the ancient time Rabhas were called Kocha or Koch. Later they were known as Rabhas. During Khoksi or Baikho worshipping due to geographical or social reasons a section of the tribe could not take part in
the Puja. That section remained as Koch. Koch Rabhas worship Runtuk. It is believed that Runtuk puja is the ancient puja of the Rabhas.

8. **Totla**: Totla means neck (gol or dingi). During puja pigs were sacrificed. A group was given responsibility of that. They used to kill pig by cutting the neck (totla) and got the name total.

9. **Hana**: There were a section who used to kill pigs during pujas and other ritualistic ceremonies by piercing with a pointed instrument. This was called hana and the group was called Hana Rabha.

Among these sub-groups, the Pati Rabhas are the most advanced one. This sub-group has accepted Hinduism for all practical purposes. Their main settlements are mainly found in the southern bank in the belt-stretching from Guwahati to Dhudnai. The pati Rabhas as well as Rangdani and the Maitory Rabhas are placed at a higher position socially. The Pati Rabhas generally live in the eastern part of the Rabha land. The Rangdani Rabhas live in the western part of the territory occupied by the Pati Rabhas. The territory of the Rangdani Rabhas extends up to the foot-hills. The Maitori Rabhas occupy the foot-hills of the Garo ranges and settle in the South-West of Lakhipur. The Pati Rabhas bear similarity with the non-tribal Assamese in respect of social and cultural behaviour. It may be mentioned that the pati Rabhas have completely forgotten their mother tongue and have accepted Assamese as their spoken and written language. Except the pati Rabhas, the other sub-groups of the Rabhas still maintain their language, not of course in the purest form. The Pati section is now more Hinduised and the impact of acculturation is more prominent amongst them. They are quite numerous in the Southern bank in the belt stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi (Dr. Das, 1962 in Asomar Janajati-Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1962, p.167). Numerically the Rangdanies are well represented in western Goalpara. The Maitories are having relatively lesser numerical strength in Assam than the Rangdanies. They are interspersed with the Rangdanies but their main concentration is western Meghalaya followed by Panchatantra area of Goalpara. Although both the section communicates with the same mother tongue, the Rangdanies appear to be less conservative in outlook than the Maitories. Some
other lesser represented sub-groups of the tribe are Dahuri and Totla in Assam plains. The Dahuri is to be seen in North Goalpara and the Totlas in North Kamrup area and in the northern belt of Darrang district particularly around Rowta, Udalguri and Hugrajuli.

3.1.2 Physical Appearance

In his ethnographic note on the Rabhas incorporated in the Census Report of 1911, J.E. Friend-Pereira had given a very poetic description about the physical features of this tribe as follows: “in general appearance, the Rabhas show all the characteristics of the Mongolian stock: a round face, flat nose, prominent cheek bones, obliquely set eyes, sallow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well developed lower extremities.”(Bordoloi et al, 121) The physical features as mentioned above may not be found in the same degree more particularly in regard to the Pati section of the tribe, but the general features described by Friend-Pereira more or less hold good still now so far as other sub groups are concerned.

3.1.3 Dwellings and Livelihood Pattern

The Rabhas like to live in compact blocks comprising of 50 to 100 families in each block. Usually the dwellings of a Rabha household consist of four houses—one main house, one guest house, one outer house for the adult family members and a fourth one for using as a cook-shed. In addition to these, cow-shed, a granary and a poultry house if possible are separately constructed. The main house where the head of the family resides is constructed in the northern side of the courtyard maintaining its length in east-west direction. Facing immediately this is the “Batghar” or the guesthouse—the courtyard being in between the two. The other two houses are constructed usually facing each other. In some Rangdani villages only one living house stretching often from 13 to 15 metres in length is constructed which however is divided into three compartments known as ‘Noksrab” “Tograb” and “Rosinok” in order from east to west. The first compartment is used as the bed room of the head of the family, the second compartment as the bed for other family members including guests and
the last one is used as the cook-shed. But with the increasing urbanization of the villages, the basic characteristics of the Rabha houses are in the process of rapid change and we can notice constructions in the modern style in the Rabha villages as well.

Like all other plains tribes, the Rabhas also derive their livelihood mainly from agriculture. They undertake cultivation of both Ahu and Sali along with some amount of pulses, mustard seeds and jute. Those who reside in the bordering areas with Meghalaya resort to shifting cultivation to a certain extent.

Rice is the staple food of the tribe with an inherent liking for dried and powered fish, pork and rice-beer. But those members of the Pati Rabhas who got themselves initiated into the Mahapurusiya sect and those who follow Chaitanya sect of the Vaishnavite School no longer indulge in pork and rice-beer.

The Rabha women are expert both in spinning and weaving and seem to be more active than their men folk. Normally they manage their apparels including those used by males. The women's dresses consist mainly of 'Rifan' 'Kambung' and 'Khodabang' which are invariably needed for attiring a bride at the time of her marriage. The male dresses consist of 'Pajal', 'Khase', 'Fali', 'Buksi', 'Passa' etc. Among these male dresses the 'Passra' or 'Passa' is made out of endi yarn while the rest are made out of fine cotton. (Bordoloi et al, p.123)

The weaving excellence of Rabha women is further testified by their intense knowledge in dying yarn purely by indigenous process. It appears that weaving is not only a secondary source of livelihood to a Rabha woman but a part and parcel of her material culture. In the same way the Rabha women are quite familiar with various styles of designing. The 'Bahurangi' songs of the Rabha tribe contain sufficient references as to the competence of the Rabha women in spinning and weaving magical apparels with floral designs that can help in winning civil and criminal cases. In their own terminology these designs are known as 'Mokdamma Ful'3.

---

3.1.4 Social Life and Institutions

Although at present the Rabhas follow the patriarchal system of family structure, there are good reasons to believe that they were once a matriarchal tribe. Even today they trace the line of decent through the females and the children after marriage are inducted into the mother’s clan. According to Bhubin Rabha (68, Manikpur, Loharghat, South Kamrup), a retired teacher and an active researcher in the field of Folklore, Rabhas are Mongoloid, and among non-Aryans the system of keeping the son-in-law at the in-laws’ place was prevalent in the earlier period (ghar-juwai). But now a days that system is no longer in use in the society if not extinct totally.

Rabhas use the mother’s barai as their title which shows that matrilineal trait is present among the tribe. But compared to other matrilineal tribes like Garos and Khasis, situation here is not the same. Matrilineal strain is only observed in accepting the mother’s clan by the children; otherwise they have shifted to following Patriarchal way of life. Thus women do not have the property right among the Rabhas.

The basic structure of the social life of the Rabhas is governed by oral or written ethnological ideas current among them. The most outstanding feature of the social life of the Rabhas is the existence of the documented customary law called “pandulipis”. These pandulipis drafted on the basis of several rounds of discussions among the Rabha people themselves covering all the socio-religious, political and judicial matter such as trial of cases and dispensation of justice, laws and rules of inheritance, succession to the office of the traditional village functionaries, rules regulating the different types of marriages, crimes, punishments and atonements, rules regulating the birth and death rite, taboos, customs, traditions etc. Since the Rabhas have different sections among them and they live in different pockets and zones, these pandulipis do not have uniform characteristics and these are always marked by regional variations. As per their customary law of inheritance all sons are entitled to get a share of the father’s

4. A ‘bara’ is alternatively called ‘bar’/ ‘housug’, which is equivalent to ‘gotra’ in Assamese, Tribes of Assam part-I, p-131
property. A daughter generally does not inherit father’s property. However the father could arrange a share for her before his death.

3.1.5 Marriage

The Rabhas are exogamous. No marriage can take place between the boy and a girl belonging to the same “Mahari” or “Barai”. A younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother. Cross cousin marriage is permitted but it is not preferred. The system of parallel cousin marriage is totally absent but two brothers of a family can marry from the same family provided the elder brother chooses to marry the elder sister. Child marriage is unknown to them. By and large the Rabhas are monogamous and divorce as well as widow remarriages are allowed.

In the past the Rabhas followed a marriage system called Kilang in which the boy was required to stay at the girl’s house. All the properties belonged to the female head. The household properties were inherited by the daughters. But the situation has changed over the years. Generally a Rabha marriage proceeds through certain ceremonies. They are tamul Kata, chira bhar, ghar kubal or jurun, biya and ghar phira. At first a few elderly women relatives of the boy visit the girl’s family with a marriage proposal (tamul kata). After a few days a second step called chira bhar is undertaken. The boy’s relatives will come with a packet of flattened rice mixed with rice-cripsies to the girl’s house. The parents of the girl may or may not accept the offer. If the offered item is not returned by the following day it is presumed that the marriage proposal is accepted. It will be followed by another ceremony called Jurun where the girl is presented with some clothes and ornaments. On the day of the marriage the groom party with all the necessary items will come to the bride’s house. The boy’s side is required to pay the bride price along with the fees and fines levied by the village concerned. The marriage function is held at the house of the bridegroom. The last ceremony related to marriage is ghar phira where the girl’s parents invite the new couple for the first time and offer a public feast to complement the occasion. According to informant Bhubin Rabha (68) regarding marriage the system was such that if someone wants a bride or a daughter-in-law, the groom’s family members would
visit the girl's place with two bottles of wine. If the girl agrees to the proposal then the girl's parents would accept the bottles and marriage will be fixed. Thus it shows that women have better position as they had the power to accept or reject a proposal. But now this system is rarely in use.

Dowry is unheard of in Rabha society till date. Earlier it was the girl's parents who used to demand bride price and the boy's family used to pay for it. But again this practice is also not in use anymore.

H.K. Rabha in his article "women in the Rabha Plains Tribal Society of Assam" observed that the existence of a functional group called baro mahari attached to a marriage is quite peculiar to a Rabha society. It is a group of both male and female members who are relatives in the female line. The main task of this group is to safeguard the interest of the womenfolk. The next day of the marriage the nokswami or the bride party ventures to appoint a patiroap or dharmiya oap or a sacred bond father, to look after the girl in her in-laws house. In case of torture of the wife by her husband, the baro mahari takes offence and appropriate measures are taken. One pair of jati kharu (made of conch shell) and mark of Vermillion is indispensable in a Rabha marriage and the wife maintains it at all costs. But if the husband happens to break the jati kharu in the course of torturing her, it is considered a great offence and the case is referred to the baro mahari court. In the same way weaving is an essential part of a girl's education and an inseparable part of their culture. The husband must not destroy the loom with half woven clothes of his wife. This is another kind of serious offence. A baro mahari day is not only severe but also defamable. Nobody in the Rabha society is ready to earn such a bad name. But now a days the influence of the baro mahari group has been reduced to a great extent.

3.1.6 Occupation

The primary occupation of the Rabhas is agriculture. They are settled cultivators and their mode of cultivation is similar to that of the other non-tribal cultivators in the plains districts of Assam. Live-stock rearing, sericulture, manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods etc. are some of their subsidiary occupations. In the agricultural pursuits both men and women are equal partners.
Rabha women are expert weavers and family requirement of clothes is met from family looms.

### 3.1.7 Religious Outlook

Mr. Friend-Pereira in his Ethnographic Notes on the Rabhas (as incorporated in 1911 Census Report) has termed the Rabhas as animists in their religious outlook. That the basis of their religious philosophy is mainly based on animism can not be denied even today, though under the influence of Hinduism a considerable number of *Pati* Rabhas have already assimilated with the neighbouring Hindu culture and have began to take part in all religious festivals like the *Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Shiva Puja* etc. From this we can notice that there are followers of both Saivism and Saktism, over and above their adherence to traditional faith in animism. Again emergence of the *Chaitanya* sect of the Vaishnavite cult\(^5\) among some of the members of the tribe is prominent along with the adoption of Christianity by a section of the tribe. This process of conversion to Christianity is distinctly visible in the Loharghat and Rani areas of Kamrup district and Dudhnoi in Goalpara district.

### 3.1.8 Festivals

Among the community religious festivals the *Baikho Puja*, meaning the worship of the goddess of wealth and prosperity, *Langa Puja* or the worship of Lord Mahadeva, propitiation of goddess *Kechai-Khanti*, the deity which protects the humanity and controls evil spirits and *Marai Puja*, meaning the propitiation of goddess *Manasa* (serpent goddess) etc. are the most important ones. A folk dance known as "*Hanaghorda*" is yet another occasion of much merriment among the *Pati* Rabhas living in the South-western part of Kamrup district. With the joining of the Bodos and the Garos living in that area, the programme assumes to be a multi-ethnic one. Although primarily a cultural festival, it has ritualistic elements also. The dance programme is simultaneously instituted with the *Rangali Bihu* festival that starts from mid April onwards every year.

---

\(^5\) Nital Ch. Rabha, 64 of Village Bardamal, Balijana Block, Dist. Goalpara, a follower of this Vaishnavite cult informed that in their village itself, there are 15 families of this cult. Pankaj Rabha(25) his son added that this section has given up traditional rice-beer and pork. They opted for vegetarian food.
3.1.9 Rabha Literature

Like the other ethnic tribal groups of the NE India and Assam, the Rabha tribe also has their own distinct language, literature and culture, which they express through mythology, folk songs, ballads, folk tales, proverbs, riddles, sayings and charms etc. ‘the Rabha language’ says B. Das, ‘is fast dying out and meagre data on their language are found to exist’. The Pati Rabhas have already accepted the Assamese language. Similarly the Rangdani and the Maitori Rabhas have also accepted the Assamese language. Other groups of Rabhas, however, preserve their language to some extent. Attempts have started to standardize the Rabha language and to impart education at the primary level particularly in the schools of the Rabha dominated area.

3.1.10 Women in Rabha Society

The Rabha women are very hard working which can be observed in their day to day life which starts in the early morning and ends late at night. A woman in the Rabha society observes every caution in handling the household chores. She will take a bath before entering the kitchen where the family deity “runtuk” is kept. Her duty includes fetching firewood, draw water, cook food, and brew the rice beer besides working in the fields and weaving clothes at home. She also requires cleaning the utensils, husking the paddy and doing such other work. She prepares bakhar or yeast; a fermentation agent used in brewing liquor and also produces khar (home made alkali) to preserve for the whole year. Like other tribal women of Assam, they dry meat, fish and vegetables and keep it for future use. Rabha women also rear pigs and fowls.

With the changing time, the sphere of activities of Rabha women has increased and they are also shouldering greater responsibilities in both their public and private affairs. In spite of all these development and change which is creeping in the tribal societies and also influencing women and their life style in a major way, it is also a fact that Rabha women are still facing a lot of disabilities; they are still in the firm grip of superstitions. They worship the spirits and believe in supernatural powers. The expression “kun bilat singi nai” meaning there is a witch in every village reveals their tremendous belief in witchcraft. A witch is
called *daini* who can by dint of her magical power separate her head portion from the body and go out for a night adventure. The gaze of the *daini* can cause a lot of misery to the people and therefore it has to be avoided. There are women *shamans* who will go into a trance and speak about the coming events. Surprisingly this kind of superstitious belief is still prevalent in the society. During my field study on July 25 and 26 2011 at village Bardamal, under Balijana block, dist. Goalpara, Mrs. Renuka Rabha, 54, advisor, Mechpara Purbanchal Rabha Mahila Samiti, informed us that women are still harassed, tortured and even killed, terming them as *dainis* for practicing witch craft. Framing a woman as *daini* and the prevalent belief and practice of witch craft is the result of illiteracy among the tribal people. This social menace can only be handled through spread of education.

According to my informant Bhubin Rabha, (68, school teacher, Manikpur, Loharghat, South Kamrup) the tradition of witch craft and witch hunting along with its influence is still very much prevalent among tradition bound conservative Rabha societies. He cited two examples of witch hunting in South Kamrup area which were fairly recent. One incident happened in Aliha near Loharghat where a woman was killed and another happened in Rajapara where a couple was brutally killed. According Mr. Rabha practices like this continue to prevail in society because in the interior villages people still believe in *ojha* (exorcist, incantator) and *bez* (practitioner who treats patients by enchanting mantras and giving medicines as well) and magic to cure different ailment and problems. A section of the people, in order to exert and sustain their influence in the society, to take revenge on their enemy or to fulfills some personal interest or sometimes to sort out some property dispute or to annex someone’s property resort to the campaign of terming someone as witch and instigate people against them. If the person (sometimes a woman and at times a couple) does not appear submissive in front of the society, once accusation is leveled against them, they were killed. But there is also an instance where chance is not given to the accused to prove innocence. When asked Mr. Rabha lamented that the belief is so deep rooted that in the society that even educated person also believe in that and take lead in sustaining and perpetuating such belief.
3.2 THE GAROS

The Garos, a matrilineal tribe of North-Eastern India, live predominantly in the districts of East and West Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Goalpara, South Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam. Garos are traditionally shifting cultivators in their settlement in the Hills. Like all tribal societies, the Garos have also certain social institutions to form, guide and control the cohesive structure of family kinship and social relations among the clans within their respective territorial jurisdictions. We do not have much written document to understand the Garo political system before the British rule. In these matter folktales, traditional customs and practices, and later British reports gave us some idea about the self governing institutions of the Garos. The early British writers like John Elliot (1789), Francis Hamilton (1814), Captain Reynolds (1849), Moffat Mills (1853) and others reported the existence of the Garo Rajas in the hills and plains of Assam and Bengal. But they did not evaluate or measure the kind of authority exercised by those ‘rajas” over their respective “kingdoms.” (Kar 1982, p2)

The Garo Hills is the abode not only of the Garos but also of the Koches, Rabhas, Hajongs, Banias and others. But the Garos settled there as a compact group. If the Garo language is believed to be separated from the original Bodo speech about 2000 years ago it may be presumed that their compact settlements in the hills might have stretched for at least 2000 years, if not for more. Several folktales that tell of the itinerary of the Garos from Tibet to the Garo Hills along the banks of Brahmaputra and through the tracts of Bhutan and Coach Behar and Dhubri referred to the leaders to the of the wandering Garos as rajas, and suggested that the matriliny had been adopted by the society after their entry into the present districts of Goalpara and Garo Hills. Here it is relevant to mention one folktale that I have gathered from Julius Sangma, (65) from Ranibari area of South Kamrup, a village inhabited by Garos. The story goes like this-

They were three sisters. The youngest one was adopted. The eldest one was Garo, the middle one was Bodo who was exchanged for banana plant, in order to cross the mighty Brahmaputra and the youngest one who was adopted was brought along with them from Tibet is Raba or Rabha (meaning brought
along). These three sisters are the ancestral mothers of Garos, Bodos and Rabhas. There are similarities between these three tribes. They had come from the same region, Tibet and linguistically also there are a lot of similarities (Tibeto-Burman family). They came from Tibet to Kamakhya situated at Nilachal Hill and worshipped different God and Goddesses, and came down to Durga Sarovar in order to settle there. At Durga sarovar they could not settle for too long with the non-tribals. From Durga Sarovar they spread to different areas like Langkona, Kinangaon, Nisan Gram etc.

There was a saying that a Garo builds his house once. He does not go for repairing because due to his occupation of Jhum cultivation he needs to shift again and again. They built it afresh in a new place every time they move. But now a day this trend is changing. With education, scarcity of land and change of occupation, people are building permanent houses instead of constantly being on the move. But according to informant Julius N. Sangma, jhum Cultivation is still prevalent in the Shantipur area. People still shift but majority of them have settled permanently.

The mythology handed down from time immemorial to the present generation and recorded in the recent period by a few Garo scholars from narration of bards from all over the land inhabited by the Garos, women occupies an important position and figures frequently in the tales. Nostu Nopantu, a goddess, is said to have given birth to the earth in the sense that she gave shape to it.

Wangala, the most traditional festival of the Garos, owes its origin to an extremely poor widow called Ae who’s pure and untainted heart and whose act of burning incense to welcome the stranger, the god Misi Saljong, won the blessings of the latter.

In the myths women enjoy so much respect that an insult to a woman can cause conflict and war. In legends women are portrayed as pure, beautiful, brave, noble and faithful wives. In the history of the tribe women figure prominently though they did not assume leadership during the course of their wanderings from Tibet to their present homeland. They lent active support to men folk in their
numerous conflicts and at times they took part in warfare. Women are also respected as progenitresses of the clans of the tribe.

System of matriline as practiced by the Garos has been analyzed by Dr. D.N. Majumder (cited in Marak’s “Status of Women in Garo Culture”) as follows:

*The hallmark of the Garo society is matriline. Matriline permeates the whole society. Descent in matrilineal, inheritance is through the females, residence after marriage is uxorilocal, and so on. Clan affiliation among the Garos is determined through the mother and paternal line is almost ignored in their kinship system....the matrilineal kinship system of the Garos has given rise to a structure of joint families based on uxorilocal residence. Garo lineages are based on traceable blood relationship through female and Garo clans are based on the belief that all members of the clan are related through blood in the female line. In Garo society the kinship group is the basic group which can be considered as the unit of intimate social, economic and to some extent political relationship. The Garos select one of their daughters (not necessarily the youngest or the oldest) to inherit their property. The daughter nominated by the parents to be the inheritress is to stay permanently in the parental household after her marriage and thus, she, along with her husband is expected to look after the property as well as the parents in their old age. As the inheritress is a member of her mother’s lineage and as the father belongs to an entirely different lineage, it is necessary that the resident son—in-law belongs to the principal male of the household’s lineage, preferably a close relation of his. This has given rise to the system of bringing one’s own sister’s son as the resident son in law of the household. After the death of the older couple, the younger couple inherits the property of the household and thus becomes the owner of the household.*

(Majumdar, 307-8)

This system of bringing in the husband’s nephew into the household as the resident son in law to continue the male lineage is known as the law of Akim. By this law, on the death of a spouse, a relative—male or female as the case may be —is to be given in marriage to the widow or the widower. This law affects both men and women adversely. When a suitable adult relative of the deceased is
not found children are forced into marrying the much older survivor. Women may be said to be the worst sufferers in such situations. On the question of compulsion, the female relatives of the girl have no say at all; they allow the custom to take its course without considering its merits and remain silent spectators. This custom had been in practice in urban as well as rural areas, among the educated as well as the illiterate. When a young man is given in marriage to a widow with a daughter to succeed his deceased male relative, the daughter is promised as his second wife. This custom of giving the daughter of the first marriage as second wife is known as *dokchapa*. This custom is still in use among the non-Christians.

Though a Garo women’s status is normally believed to be much better than her counterparts in patriarchal societies, her position has not been favourably affected by the matrilineal set up. As usual power rests with the males and the *mahari* or the closely related members of a clan including those who married into the clan. Though women inherit property, she does not exercise exclusive right over it and her husband has the final say in exercising authority over household possessions as well as landed property. There are instances when a *nokkrom* or resident son-in law squanders the family possession and property and ruins the family fortune while the wife remains a silent spectator. Polygamy is practiced with the consent of the principal wife and her *chras*. The fact that Garo women have no voice in determining their own fate has been stated by Dr. D.N. Majumdar (cited in Marak’s “Status of Women in Garo Culture”) thus:

> In the affairs of the mahari the women have no voice at all. Such matters are exclusively decided by the male elders...and as males donot consider the opinion of women in such matters necessary, there is no way for the women to influence the mahari affairs, except through their husbands. Even regarding matters concerning women, the opinion of the women concerned or all the women in general of the mahari is not considered as essential. Women must abide by the decision of the male elders. Marriages are settled by the mahari and the opinion of the girl is not considered significant.

(Majumdar, 60-61)

The position of the *nokna* or the heiress of the *aking* which means a large area of land belonging to a particular clan is hardly any better. On her behalf the
land is managed solely by her husband. Though the husband wields immense power, he has to get the consent of his wife on various issues including the sale of property and land. The chras of the nokna (heiress) can object to any misuse of power. In case of litigation, the nokna stops coming to the courts of law once formalities have been completed; the chras represent her in subsequent appearances.

Each Garo assumes himself or herself to be a member of one of the five divisions based on matrilineal descent. These are exogenous by rule of marriage. Out of these five, the three divisions namely Sangma, Momin and Marak are prominent due to their large size and wide territorial dispersal. Each sociolinguistic subdivision is known by its expertise in certain skill. The Garo marriage, customary usages and practices associated with it reflect the dynamics of socio cultural changes. The nubile girl takes the initiative in matrimonial alliances. It is her prerogative to initiate the decision making process. In this matter she is helped by the members of her chra (matrilineal kins). On the other hand bride’s father consolidates his hold through akim rules which make it obligatory to accept his sister’s own or related son as nokrom of his family. The ideal Garo union is between adults belonging to different machong or mahari (clan). In preferential category, mother’s brother’s daughter is an ideal mate to continue the nokchame relation in perpetuity. Polygamy is not forbidden. But choice of wives is restricted to sisters of first wife’s family. There is no dowry system among the Garos. The expenses of feast and other ceremonies are borne by bride’s mahari.

Garo society being matrilineal in nature, the inheritance is through female line that is from the mother to a daughter. The heiress remains in her natal home with her husband (nokrom). The non-heiress daughters (agate) establish separate households after marriage either in their natal village or elsewhere. The rights over land are held by mahari members of heiress although land resources are managed by nokrom. He cannot sell the land without the consent of members of his wife’s machong. Similarly a man after marriage doesnot abandons relations with members of his own mahari and machong. He continues to supervise and manage matters of his female relatives, which is, mother, mother’s sister, cousin
sisters and nieces. He depends on his matrilineal relatives in case of help in any emergency. Such dependency is reflected in a Garo proverb 'mana nona ok:jkna dena kok'. The free translation runs like this 'my stomach is for my mother and sisters while my basket is for my wife and children'. This proverb effectively summarizes that as a son or a brother, the man is at liberty to satisfy his hunger in his mother's or sister's home but he does not feel free to satisfy his hunger in his wife's and children's households for whose prosperity he toils hard.

As far as who becomes a *Nokna* (the heiress), there is a difference between Garo Hills and Assam. In the two districts of Kamrup and Goalpara, a *Nokna* is the eldest daughter of the family where as in Garo Hills a *Nokna* is the youngest daughter of the family. But in some cases the heiress becomes the one whom the parents consider as most eligible among many daughters.

Their can be neither a widow or widower since Garo customary practices make provision for onsong and onga that is remarriage of widow and widower. A widowed-mother-in-law among the Garos is supposed to be married by her son-in-law who is the *Nokrom*. The structural importance of this marriage is far more than the biological one. The *Nokrom* has to become the head of the family, after the death of his father-in-law; he must marry, as a custom, the owner of the property who is still his mother-in-law. The headship of the family is connected with marriage to the owner of the property. In case the widowed mother-in-law marriage someone outside, the *Nokrom* will lose the authority of the family and the *Nokna* may not get the property in her mother's life time. So in order to get the ownership of property for his wife and the authority and headship of the family for himself the *Nokrom* marries the widowed mother-in-law. This custom gives social security to the widowed mother-in-law who under the norms becomes the principal wife and her daughter the secondary one till the death of her mother. Thus a Garo woman is always secured economically and socially under the matrilocal and matrilineal social set up. If a widow has no daughter she is expected to adopt one from suitable relatives and is obligatory on her part to marry this adopted daughter's husband. This is locally referred as onsong onga literally meaning replacement marriage. In case the widowed mother-in-law refuses to marry her heiress daughter's husband, that is, her own son-in-law, she
forfeits the right to exercise authority over property and latter passes to her heiress daughter during former's life time. Such marriage between sons-in-law is a necessity since an heiress daughter can not acquire the rights of property as long as her mother is alive and moreover the property affairs should be managed by a man married to the owner of the property. Thus this form of marriage ensures continuity of male managerial ship. The husbands of non-heiress daughters or agate have no such obligation. Furthermore such son-in-laws are strictly abstained from entering a matrimonial bond with their mother-in-law. In the South Kamrup area of Assam, the area of my study and also the area of Garo concentration, almost all the Garos have taken Christianity. And with Christianity and spread of education the marriage between the widowed mother-in-law and the son in-law has long become a dying custom. New generation of Garos have not even heard of this custom.

Though monogamous marriages are preferred, polygamy is a common feature among the Garos. Sometimes the man is compelled to go for polygamous union with his wife and mother in law as co-wives in case of the death of the father-in-law. Otherwise also most of the Garo women do not have any problem with polygamy if their husbands want that. Moreover if the husband is energetic and financially sound with a bigger jhum cultivation he is easily given permission to have an additional wife. Here the permission of the first wife is a must to secure the additional wife. All the wives share a common house and all the additional wives need to obey the eldest wife who is considered principal wife and owner of the property, and only her daughter is eligible to become Nokna. Plurality of wives, among Garos is sometimes considered a symbol of higher status of man and the additional wives provide more work forces for Jhum fields.

3.2.1 Concept of Machong and Mahari

Machong is too big a body to discharge all these onerous functions especially when the members of a machong may be spread over different distant areas. The Garos have, therefore, their own scheme of carrying out the machong responsibilities by a smaller group of kins, closely related by common motherhood, called mahari of the husband or wife of the household. The concept
of mahari has two fold expressions: as a consanguineous until in relation to a member of a household, and as a functional unit in respect of that household (Kar 1982, p8). The consanguineous unit of a mahari refers to a smaller body of the closer matri-relations, male or female, of a household member in which the male matri-relations (Chra) predominate. Thus the consanguineous mahari of the husband consists of his mother, sister, maternal uncles and aunts, etc.

The functional unit of the mahari is conceived in reference to a household and not to a member as such. It means an effective group of persons closely related by marriage, formed for the maintenance of a household and for its continuity as a socio-economic institution. Thus the functional mahari of a household consists of the consanguinals of its principal female and her affinals like the principal male, and the husband of her inheritress daughter (nokrom). For all practical purposes the close consanguinals of the principal female of the household, its male head and the nokrom form the composite character of the functional mahari. Here we find the representation of the two machongs, that of the principal female and of the principal male, accompanying the marriage and forming the household. The focal point of power has, however been the chra or the male matri relations of the principal female of the household.

The role of the household head and the nokrom cannot be underestimated because of the overriding power of the chra in a functional mahari. Without the former, a family or a household cannot be initiated and its continuity also cannot be conceived unless as a reflex of the a'kim in which the machong of the household head and its nokrom (nephew of the former) is equally involved with that of the principal female and her nokna.

In case of each of the household, inheritance passes from the mother to the chosen daughter, and ideally never gets diffused. The household head acts as the custodian of the household property. These managerial and custodial responsibilities are handed down to his nephew as the nokrom of the household. A family or household is thus the confluence of the representations, responsibilities and the projections of two machongs that form the family or the household.
The term nokma has come to be used in several senses. The principal female of the senior most household and its head are generally referred to as nokma (Kar 1982:11). A man with riches, and a man performing a ceremony for acquiring social prestige and status in exchange of lavish feasts are known or referred to as Gamni Nokma and Gana Nokma respectively. There are Chalang and miteni nokma also. But none compares well with the nokma of the a'khing (referred as a'khing nokma). He administers the political, social and economic life of the people as a custodian, religious head and the highest executive of the a'khing and he does it with the advice of the a'khing elders.

A long tradition endows him with certain rights and privileges. It was under the auspices of the nokma that the lands for jhuming used to be distributed among the households of the a'khing. Certain common functions were to be discharged by the pooling of labour resources from all the household of the a'khing. This contribution of labour power by the households assumed the character of periodic taxation for works of common benefit like the cleaning and construction of roads and paths, nokpantes (bachelor-house), organization of village festivals, preparation and burning of jhum site for the first term and others, under the administration of the a'khing-nokma.

As a religious head, he has the privilege of initiating a village or community festival in his own house as the residence of the senior most household of the a'khing. No household can precede the nokma household in inaugurating certain ceremonies either in the village or in the jhum fields. No household can possess ‘Nagra’ or a special drum except the nokma-household that can only arrange for a special ceremony and sacrifice for making it. Nobody can perform Gana ceremony for wearing an elbow ring as a symbol of social status without the previous permission of the a'khing-nokma.

The a'khing nokma is also responsible for maintaining peace and order within the a'khing and defend the same against external aggression. It also appears that there are no legislative or judicial organs in the a'khing. The functions of both the organs were discharged by the nokma with the common consent of the a'khing elders and his council of advisors.
The nokma has to conduct the proceedings of the council of akhing-elders in settling the intra- a'khing disputes. But he never tries to impose his own views on the witnesses or on the contestants. He does much of the questioning and interrogations and provokes the participants for more information and comments.

The traditional Garo society has developed certain norms of behaviour in their intra-familial and inter-familial relations based on matrilineal kin groups, and these are followed with implicit regularity. A Garo always observes a code of conduct that abhors all acts that may injure the feelings of any person and honours those that maintain or restore peace therein. “Unlawful acts are felt to be wrong not because they violate or infringe on a moral precept but because these hurt some particular person or damage an individual’s reputation or feelings”.

Every Garo regards himself a constituent of a kin group, mahari or machong which has an inherent obligation of looking after the interest and prestige of its own members. Their concept of right or wrong generally concerns the individuals, and through them their respective maharis are involved.

The principle of reciprocity is always held in highest esteem in all their social and economic activities. Political activities are not an exception to this rule. Every action good or bad has to be reciprocated by a similar action. Murder was to be retaliated by murder in the older days, and the mutual revenges were carried down the generations. The mode of settling such a dispute was by inducing the injured party or mahari to accept dai (compensation) as the price of blood. (Hamilton: 1814:19, in Kar, 1982, p17)

The Garos have developed an institution to train up their young people as good citizens of the a'khing-polity. It is called nokpan which literally means the house of the bachelors, and is found in every village or a'khing. All the bachelors of the village have to sleep therein and pass their leisure time in and around nokpante. Drums, gongs, feathers of fowls, horns of cattle and other public properties of the village are to be kept in the nokpante. Under the leadership of the senior man of the village, young people were to learn the various arts and crafts in respect of cane, wood and bamboo works, and thus to excel in the making of nets, mats and baskets of various sizes and uses. Beating of drums, and
gongs, playing on flutes, harps and reeds, and dances for various festivals also used to be practiced in and around the *nokpante*. Besides, the village elders meet here for deliberations and decisions on things of interest.

The entry of ladies to a *nokpante* is, however, strictly regulated. Girls had no such common institution for their training, and were to grow up in the company of their parents and married elders. The latter gave the former training in all possible fields and household works. The *nokpante* was always set up in a strategic position of the village or the *a'khing* so that the entire body of young men of the area could be pressed to service in any emergency situation. It was also the place where the art of warfare was taught to the young bachelors and teaches them the spirit of co-operation. A village may have more than one dormitory each belonging to a particular lineage group.

3.2.2 Influence of Christianity and Education on Garo Society

Christianity and education brought a change in the life of a Garo woman plagued by different impediments to their development in the traditional way of life. With the establishment of a Christian Mission in 1867 specially designated for the Garos, which established schools while spreading religion.

But Christian churches left untouched those social customs which did not clash with Christian tenets. Polygamy and *dokchapa* became illegal for Christians, but the law of *akim* still held good in so far as a successor had to be provided to a widow or a widower. This custom still continued to plague the Garos, especially, women, till the recent period in both urban and rural areas. As has been already mentioned, acquisition of high education by women had undermined the power of the *chras* and forcible marriages are becoming very rare. In some *mahari* meetings, women’s opinions are sought for; they are entrusted with almost equal responsibilities as men.

Education has brought about a revolution in women’s world and their status. Her world broadened to include other lands, people and cultures and her experiences widened to an unprecedented degree. Her success in the outside world has also brought her liberation from repression and tyranny. An educated woman has a career and other aims besides marriage. Economic independence
besides liberating her from tyranny, gave her self esteem. Thus women have been in a better position than even before to fight against prejudices, conservatism and double standards. Traditionally women have been bread winners but now she has firmly established herself as a major source of family income.

Women’s low self esteem in the past is evident in the submissive, self-abasing tone in which they used to approach men of their choice. The expression “to live under the shade (protection) of your love” where a man was compared to a tree, was a common phrase. It has been observed that women’s self image has now vastly improved.

The epic lore of Garo has abundance of poems, folktales and folksongs describing their beautiful land, valour of brave men and beauty of damsels. The songs arek Garo are link between tradition and modernity.

The contemporary Garo society has undergone multi dimensional changes in time and space. The eleven territorial divisions with distinct dialectical and cultural variations are now almost indistinguishable. In spite of the customary sanctions against rules of exogamy the cases of breaches of such customary practices are on the increase and society is gradually tolerating these instances. Education, employment, spread of Christianity, industrialization, urbanization and exposure to other forces of change made impact on Garo social institution too. Due to the shift in economy and social mobility the supervisory control of machong is gradually being diminished over such families who migrated near the growing urban centres in search of better life. However the basics of Garo society such as clan, sub clan, solidarity, cohesiveness which regulate marriage alliances and control family life remain unchanged. (Roy, Shibani and S.H.M.Rizvi- “Revaluating tribes of North East India” Vanyajati, 1987, 35:2-12)

3.2.3 Status of Women in Garo Society

Garo being matrilocal and matrilineal society it has its own repercussions on the status of its women. After marriage it is the husband who shifts to wife’s house. In case of heiress the husband stays in the house of his parents-in-law. In case of a non-heiress, the husband shifts to the new house with his wife, in wife’s village only. Thus the wife stays on in familiar atmosphere as she does not shift
to her husbands' parental home. Psychologically she is secured and is not obliged to accommodate the so called hostile relations of husbands. A Garo girl grows up in a very congenial and intimate atmosphere with no inhibition of any kind. A girl child freely roams about in the village and Jhum fields and enjoys all the pre-marital liberties. By the time a girl reaches puberty she is supposed to learn all the household works independently and to help her mother in household work as well as in jhum fields. Puberty does not mean any special occasion for the Garo. It comes naturally and the girl is considered eligible for marriage after attaining puberty. After marriage too she is in a convenient position as she continues to enjoy the same congenial atmosphere with of course little more strict code of conduct. Matrilliny also places a woman at a beneficial plane. She inherits all the marital property and her house hold is the centre of all religious rituals and ceremonies in which she plays an important role. But it is also a fact that women do not enjoy absolute authority as the husband for all practical purposes is the real manager of property and de facto head of the household.

In her article "status of women in Garo culture", Caroline Marak begins with reference to mythology. In Garo myths women occupy important position and enjoy so much respect that an insult to a woman could cause conflict and war. In legends women are portrayed as pure, beautiful, brave and noble. But in reality, Marak maintains that there is a subjugation of women. The matrilineal system does not protect their position and rights. Although much importance was given to a female child, men dominated and in numerous practical ways were treated as superior to women.

In the matrilineal societies, where the predominance of presumption is towards the existence of an empowered woman in the traditional sense of the term, i.e. her rights to hold property, and hence hold power, the reality presents a picture of institutionalized dispossession and disempowerment. In Garo society, where the society is organized into matrilineal groups known as "machongs" or motherhood as the term is roughly construed, it is evident that while inheritance of property is "through mother and restricted to female live and men do not inherit property", the actual exercise of power and authority resides in the 'secured' hands of males in society, i.e., the Chra-Pnte or Chratangrang
comprising elder and younger brothers of every woman, their maternal uncles (manatangrang as they are called) who take upon themselves the "duty" of "initiating and carrying through all works that have to do with religious, civil, criminal and judiciary laws as well as those which regulates marriage and heredity". This compels us to wonder what is actually left to women to control in a traditional society as Garos. It is evident again that apart from lending her name to the document of title, over her sole means of sustenance i.e., land over any other incidental social or political power and authority that could flow from any such title over predominant means of production.

The fact that in the matrilineal societies like Garos and Khasis, the position of women is merely the custodian of the family property, the principal means of production and wealth in a primordial society vests with the males, i.e., in the likes of the maternal uncles, is observed in recent empirical studies. Further this position has been repeatedly reflected in the judgements of the Gauhati High Court, relying on and applying the Customary Laws exclusively on disputes over property in the Khasi and Jaintia Hill district. In the case of Mrs. C. Kharkrang vs N. Bagchi & ors (1995(11) GLT 324) at para 13, their Lordships have observed,

"The custom prevalent in this matrilineal society is that though the property is in the custody of the matrilineal head, Ka Khadduh the male members of the family look after the property as manager".

Thus it is evident that in spite of modernity, the traditional societies in the North Eastern part of India, continues to be under the shadows of customary laws and practices, with regard to the administration of justice. This preponderance of customary laws in its turn has led to the perpetuation of the disadvantaged position that the women faced in these societies since antiquity. Women continue to languish as the marginal in their respective societies. Though comparative analysis with the caste Hindu women in mainland India ,at times give the impression of a better status for womenfolk in the region, micro studies of the customary laws of some of the traditional societies give a different picture. The women of this region suffer from being twice dispossessed. By virtue of belonging to the North eastern part of India, they are rendered socially and
politically marginalized in Indian society and polity, added to this is their peripheral status at the traditional power discourses as well.

### 3.2.4 Appearance

The Garos are not very dark in complexion, but they are darker than the neighbouring Khasis in comparison with Mongolian features prominent in them. Col. Dalton in his ‘Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal’, described Garos: ‘their faces are round and short. The forehead is not receding, but projects very little beyond the eye, which is small, on a level with the face, very dark and obliquely set. The want of prominence in the nose is remarkable. The whole face has the appearance of being flattened, the mouth sharing in the compressed appearance and not at all prognathous’. Hair is sometimes straight but more often wavy and even curly.

### 3.2.5 Physical and General Characteristics

Garos, both men and women are short, the men averaging 5ft ½inch and the women 4fit10inch. Their structure is rather lean and wiry than stout, and a fat man is quite a rarity. They do not exhibit the development of the lower limbs that is, such a feature of, for instance, the Khasis, but an outdoor life and continual climbing up and down the rugged hills has made them hard working and capable of much endurance. Though strong, they are not remarkable as porters, though in the cold season they make long marches to markets with heavy baskets of cotton on their backs. The women are not beautiful, especially when they pass middle age, but when young, they are buxom and healthy in appearance and their good natured smiling faces make them fairly attractive. A great disfigurement is the distension of their ears by the weight of enormous earrings, which often break the lobes in two. The men rarely have hair in their faces. If a moustache is worn, it usually consists of a few hairs on either side of the upper lip, owing to the custom of pulling out the rest.

Garos are friendly and pleasant in manner, and usually exhibit very little trace of shyness. They are honest and fairly truthful. They are also said to be very lazy and it is difficult to make them do a fair task even for good wages. But contrary to this view it is also observed that they are actively involved in felling
trees to clear land, wedding their fields, and bringing their crops to market. Since their requirements were fulfilled by the production of their own fields, they probably did not feel it necessary to work for wages. Except for their passion for drink, the Garos have very few vices. They love to enjoy feast accompanied by singing and dancing. Apart from that they have very few avenues of amusement. They are quiet people and also law abiding.

3.2.6 Geographical Distribution

The Garos may be roughly divided into Hill Garos and Plains Garos, and both classes inhabit the district which owes its name to the tribe (GARO HILLS). Plains Garos are also found in the under mentioned districts-

- Mymensingh
- Goalpara
- Kamrup
- Khasi and Jaintia Hills

In the Goalpara district, there are a number of widely scattered Garo villages. Most of these lie close to the Garo Hills border, but others have been established on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra. The inhabitants of these are Akawés. In Kamrup, on the border between that district and the Khasi Hills, there exists a colony of Garos known as the Hana Garos. According to their own traditions, they are the direct descendants of the Garos who entered Assam in the days of Arambit Raja. They believe that he married the daughter of one of the Garo chiefs, and their daughter, Nini-Hana was their ancestress. According to Mr. Gait the Hanas ‘are said to be descended from a man who speared an elephant;’ in such a case the name would be of Assamese origin. Besides the Hana Garos there exist two other divisions in the Kamrup districts, the Damelia Garos-who like the Hanas, speak the language which is almost exactly the same as Awé-and the Baragharias, who appear to be more akin to the Megams, and have in them and their language a strong admixture of the Khasi element. According to Major Playfair among themselves they prefer the appellation of A’chik, which is common to all Garos. But the Kamrup Garos also hold the same belief regarding
their origin as the rest of the tribe, and do not admit that they are descendents from emigrants from the Hills.

3.2.7 Origin

Garo, a name given by alien to refer this tribe became their identity. The origin of the name ‘Garo’ has been the subject of some conjecture. In the southern portion of the hills there exists a division of the tribe who call themselves Gara or Ganching. These people are not far removed from the Mymensingh district, from which direction the Garos were first approached by Europeans or Bengalis. It is therefore not unlikely that this division of the tribe first received their appellation of Gara that the name was extended to all the inhabitants of the hills, and that in time it became corrupted from Gara to garo. Another theory is that, one of the original leaders of the migration was named Garu, and that he gave his name to the tribe. In one of their old songs, the country of their origin is referred to as Garu-a'-song, or the country of the Garu. From the fact that the Garos never use the name except in conversation with a foreigner, but always call themselves A’chik (hill man), Mandé (the man) or A’chik mandé. According to Major Playfair the name Garo is merely a corruption of the name of one of the subdivision of the tribe.

It is believed that the Garos originally migrated from Tibet. Their original place was ‘Tarua’ or Tibet. They belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family of Tibeto-Burman family of Bodo group. Majority of them are now Christian as compared to Hindu Garos. Geographically the Garo tribes have two divisions: those who inhabit in the hills and those who live in the plains. There are 12 main divisions of the Hill-Garos and about 6 of the plain Garos. Besides being basically geographical, these divisions were made according to certain tasks assigned to them which distinguished their names such as, the Abengs were told to pick cotton, the kochus to prepare dried fish, the chiksaks to collect edible bamboo shoots and so on.

3.2.8 Food

The Garos are fond of any kind of animal food including beef. In their villages they rear goats, pigs, fowls and ducks. Besides these most Hill Garos eat
dogs and cats and every kind of wild animal that they can kill. Again Nakam or dried fish is highly preferred by the Garos. Gram or dried venison or beef is also considered a great delicacy. The liquor which plays such an important part in the daily life of the Garo is always brewed and never distilled. It is prepared from rice, millet, maize or Job’s tears.

3.2.9 Language

Garo is the language of the majority of the people of the Garo Hills in the Indian state of Meghalaya. Garo is also used in Kamrup, Dhubri, Goalpara and the Darrang districts of Assam. Garo uses the Latin alphabet and has a close affinity to Bodo, the language of one of the dominant communities of Assam.

3.2.10 Garo Women in Assam

While discussing about the status and role of women in Garo society, my informants said that almost all of them have turned Christians over the years, but in their day to day life they are still governed by Garo customary laws and customs. Thus Mahari controls their society and Maharis exercises tremendous control over their social life. Women’s opinions are sought in the Mahari discussions but ultimately it is the male members of the Women’s mahari who calls the shot and decides on important issues. But regarding property dealing, the women’s consent is a must.

Adward Steady N. Sangma, Assistant Professor, D.K. College, Mirza, while commenting on women’s status in Garo society, observed that apart from possessing the property, woman practically has no such right because the property she owns is handled by the husband or the maternal uncle. Moreover women do all the hard work in their day to day life, from rearing children, managing household chores, going to field, helping in cultivation, etc but they hardly get any acknowledgement for that.

The system of onsong and onga (remarriage of widow and widower) is not prevalent in Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam but in Garo Hills this is still in practice. Again Law of Akim is still in practice among the Megam Mahari in West Garo Hills Districts.