CHAPTER I

Introduction

Women empowerment is a global issue and discussions on women’s rights are at the forefront of many formal and informal campaigns worldwide. Empowerment is widely used but seldom defined. Literally empowerment denotes “to invest with power”. Power is defined as the ability to influence the behaviour of others with or without restraint. Historically the world over, either by law or by custom, the status of women is undermined by asymmetrical power relationships in decision-making, personal and social rights, access to resources and entitlement.

Empowerment endows women with the ability to gain control over resources, develop physical and psychological capacity to challenge the prevailing gender norms and ensure change. Again empowerment of women is defined as the process in which women challenge the existing norms and culture to effectively improve their well-being. Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. (Sahay, 1998). Empowerment helps women to make necessary transitions over their life courses. It also implies avoidance of crime and atrocities against women and improvement in education, health etc.

Empowerment of women can be viewed as a continuum of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing components. Improvement of the status of women and their access to family planning services, make a triple contribution to sustainable development such as they make their own contribution to the quality of life and eradication of absolute poverty, they contribute to economic growth, by
raising the quality and skills of the work force and slowing down population
growth thus reducing the burden on the environment which will improve

1.1 Statement of the problem

The status of women is a recently-emerged complex, dynamic and multi-
dimensional concept. It is generally viewed in relative context. The ‘status of
women’ has been defined by scholars putting different emphasis to its various
dimensions. It is used as an access to resources such as education, gainful
employment and health services. Sometimes, it is also used to indicate the position,
power, prestige and authority that a women has in various situations in the society
(Mahadevan et al, 1989). To be more specific, the concept of status of women in
society assumed international significance after the first major United Nations
Conference on women held in 1975. The concept of status helps ordering of
individuals in terms of attributes like level of education, occupation, income,
perception of one’s status within the home and in the society, decision-making,
number of restrictions imposed in one’s activities, freedom and so on. Within a
country, the level of status of women significantly differs from one area to the
other, one community to another and also from rural to urban (Vohra and Sen,
1986). In determining the status of women, factors such as the role of women in
decision-making in the family and in the community, their educational status, their
participation in social political and economic activities and their position in the
various professions as well as their legal status in terms of marriage, divorce and
inheritance of property should be taken into consideration. (Soni, 2000).
When proper education and environment are given, the social weaknesses can be overcome and women force can be used as a good human resource potential for the development of the nation. (Soundarapandian, 1999). The International conference on public education convened jointly by UNESCO and International Bureau of education, in Geneva 1952, discusses the question of access of women education and made some recommendations to ministries of education of all member countries. Exceptionally gifted women in India have made individual contribution to education and society but the vast majority of women have been deprived of the opportunities to develop their potential to full capacity. Since women are considered as prime movers of the society, their education should assume greater relevance in the process of the development of the society. Literature and history are rich with names of many women who have been responsible for transformation of their times in some way or other. When the demand for women’s education started in the 18th century, it was more in the light of women’s right, for the access to knowledge and not as a national economic asset. Then the attitude changed and for the first time, the UNESCO conference in 1962 underlined the importance of the access of girls and women to technical and vocational education for economic and social development. (Soni, 2000).

Like the most of the Developing countries in the world the women in India often face diverse nature of socio-cultural and economic problems. These problems range from low level of socio-economic development to prevalence of acute gender inequities. The women in the country are not only socially at a lower level compared to their men counterpart, but economically also they are less mobile and in most cases deprived. In most societies of our country, many vital activities of women such as child bearing and caring, food preparation, family management,
fuel and water carrying, animal rearing and a host of other activities in the house and agricultural field are not duly accounted for. It is especially more meaningful in the context of rural area where women constitute a substantive proportion of work force either in the formal or in the informal sectors.

Women are really not free to explore their interest and make choices with a more conscious perspective. Girl’s capabilities are usually under estimated by the parents, teachers and the society. Indian girls have not been trained adequately by the educational institutions to be able to battle on their own and hence they give way to pressure and thus find a vast number of able women ending up in low stratus, low paid jobs. Again, in a comparative society like India, aiming high in the external world of success and power by women is not realized. Usually, girls are not taken seriously as career is considered to be of secondary importance. Marriage is the principal determinant of a women’s social position and it is more important to get married to men with high paid jobs. The traditional myth such as—girls do not need to work, the husband’s duty is to support them, women’s work is in the house, and those who work outside neglect their homes and children; women may work until they marry, married women and mothers are not reliable workers; women are poor at qualitative analysis and unable to make tough decisions etc. continue to influence women’s career and act as barrier to women’s advancement into senior positions.

Womens’ access to wage and salaried employment is heavily skewed towards lower paid jobs. When new job opportunities are created specially for women they tend to be in low wage, low skilled occupations, often under highly exploitative conditions. The vast majority of women work in self employment outside agriculture in low paying trade or service activities. The major difficulties
encountered by women in self employment activities relate to access to credit markets and technical skills. Customary low and convention in most countries preclude women from claiming family assets. Women also lack adequate access to institutional credit facilities. Poor women living at sub-subsistence level have no choice but to be primarily wage-earners and assume responsibility for the livelihood of their children. Any attempt to change the situation of poverty for vast majority of the population in our country today, needs to recognize and validate the “worker role” of poor women, and enable them to meet their basic livelihood needs over which they have no control. It is impossible to even think of affecting the situation of the poor people in today’s economy. The forces against the poor are so many and the social system so biased in favour of the rich that it will not respond to the demands of the individual poor women. In the economy, the various forces that work against the poor are highly organized. It is so far the poor self employed workers, as well as the poor women workers, who are not organized as workers. To be able to ameliorate the situation of poverty of women workers, some direct interventions need to be made in the economy as it exists today. This is possible only by organizing the women workers and enhancing their collective strength. Their strength lies in numbers and these needs to be brought together.

In the social services; health is of paramount importance as a national asset and basis to sustain as well as stimulate optimum levels of efficiency. Health is a prerequisite for increasing productivity, while successful education relies on adequate health as well. The preponderance of the evidence is that health and nutrition do affect employment, productivity, wages and very substantially so among the poorest of the poor. This findings magnifies the policy priority of health in development, not only is health a major goal in itself, it has a significant impact
on income levels as well. Thus, health of the people is an index of prosperity and well being of a nation. Excessive workload, lack of proper nutrition, repeated pregnancies, poor education and lack of access to health care facilities mark the lives of the majority of women particularly those who are poor. Many countries continue to suffer from inadequate and very skewed distribution of medical services. In addition one quarter to one third of all maternal deaths occur when birth are too numerous or to mothers who are under 16 or over 33 and when the births are too closely spaced. Early marriage and teenage pregnancies which have continued to flourish despite legislation to the contrary in some countries have contributed to this problem.

The empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development of countries all over the world. These issues of gender equality are discussed in world conferences National and International conferences etc. In order to give a fillip to empowerment of women and appropriate institutional mechanism and interventions have been consciously built into the development design. In India, the eight five year plan emphasized especially women programmes to make women equal partners and participants in the development programmes. At the grass root levels the programmes are for women’s organization and groups. Furthers, through the 72nd and 73rd constitutional Amendments, the empowerment of women issues were tackled through access of women to education, training, credit and productive and sustained employment opportunities. (Dutta & Ghosh, 2002). Improvement in health, education, drinking water, energy supply, sanitation and housing coupled with attitudinal changes also facilitate their social development (Soni, 2001).
The Ministry of Rural Development is implementing various poverty alleviation and Rural Development Programmes. These programmes have special components for Women and funds are earmarked as ‘Women’s Component’ to ensure flow of adequate resources for the same. [Government of Assam, (GOA, 2003)]. The major schemes, having women’s Component implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development include the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), the Restructured Centrally sponsored Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) and the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP). The Schemes are SGSY: The Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, which has been launched with effect from April 1, 1999, is a holistic programme covering various aspects of self-employment, such as organization of the poor into self-help groups, training, credit, technology, infrastructure and marketing. It is envisaged that 50 per cent of the Groups formed in each Block should be exclusively for women who will account for at least 40 per cent of the Swarozgaris. Under the Scheme, Women are encouraged in the practice of thrift and credit which enables them to become self-reliant. Through assistance in the form of Revolving Fund, bank credit and subsidy, the Yojana seeks to integrate women in the economy by providing increasing opportunities of self employment. Total number of Individual Swarozgaris assisted in this Scheme during the year were 254,615 out of which achievement for women were 60,091 (23.60%). Members of SHGs assisted were 453,006 out of which achievement for women were 306,744 (67.71%) and total Swarozgaris assisted were 709,149 out of which achievements for women were 359,236 (50.66%). (SIRD, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). SGRY: The Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) has been launched with effect from 25th
September, 2001 (after merging the JGSY & EAS). The primary objective of the Scheme is to provide additional wage employment in all rural areas and thereby provide food security and improve nutritional levels. The secondary objective is the creation of durable community, social and economic assets and infrastructural development in rural areas. Wage employment under this scheme is extended to below poverty line families. It is stipulated that 30% of the employment opportunities should be reserved for women. Total achievements under this scheme during the year 2003-04 were 3,503.95 lakh mandays out of which achievements for women were 946.51 lakh mandays (27.01%). IAY: The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) aims at providing assistance for the construction of houses for people Below the Poverty Line (BPL) in rural areas. Under the Scheme, priority is extended to widows and unmarried women. It is stipulated that IAY houses are to be allotted in the name of women members of the household or, alternatively, in the joint names of husband and wife. Total number of Dwelling Units completed during the period 2003-04 was 979,079 out of which 365,335 houses (37.31%) were allotted in the name of women and 342,690 houses were allotted jointly in the name of both husband and wife. (SIRD, June 2002). CRSP: The restructured Centrally Sponsored Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP), which was launched with effect from 1st April, 1999, provides for the construction of sanitary latrines for rural households. ARWSP: Under the Rural Water Supply Programme, training is being offered to women to enable them to play an active role Capacity building through self-help group in using and maintaining hand pumps for the supply of drinking water. Women are also represented in village level committees and are actively involved in the selection of sites for hand pumps and other sources. The most important aspect of SGSY is organizing the rural poor people into Self Help
Groups (SHGS) which are a right march towards empowering rural women through the Bank credit and govt. subsidy. (SIRD, 2004).

Training is an important component of Human Resource Development (HRD) which enhances knowledge, skill and attitude. For building technical competency among farm women, need based skill-oriented training programmes to reinforce their role in different activities need special attention. The training programmes should initially be organized on their felt-needs and then be switched over to unfelt but essential needs. Training has been recognized as an important strategy in building organizations of poor women who are not only faced with economic issues of survival, poverty, assetlessness and indebtedness but also gender issues resulting from their own internal weakness and lack of confidence (Omvedt, 1986). The importance of the educational and training component cannot be underplayed in any empowerment strategy, as it helps women attain critical knowledge and skills to protect their interests, develop consciousness about the causes of their exploitation and subordination, articulate alternatives and develop the organizational and political skills. (Schuler, 1986). A special project for establishment of training cum technology development centre (TTDC) in selected district has also been proposed to be taken up during the year 2002-03. The training and technology development support can build the capacity of rural people for creating self-employment avenues by availing locally available resources under the SGSY programmes. The poor women individually can not stand up or speak out for their rights and privileges and remain meek spectators in the development process. Creating awareness about different aspects having a bearing on changing the quality of life of rural women is another important component of development of rural women. Group economic activity is still some thing very new to rural
women in Assam. These training programmes have been able to impart a new face to certain traditional income generating activities of the state. Management of SHGs, entrepreneurship development, marketing management is the important components of the training programmes besides the technical aspects of the activities. District Rural Development Agency (DRDAs) allowed setting apart up to 10% of the SGSY allocation on training. These would be maintained as “SGSY-training fund”. SGSY will ensure up-gradation of the technology in the identified activity clusters. The technology intervention will seek to add value to the local resources, including processing of the locally available material from natural and other resources for local and non-local market. In Assam there after chalked out a plan to sensitize it by different Govt. and Non-Govt. institute working at different level for implementation and monitoring of Rural Development Programmes. (SIRD, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007).

Empowerment could be a planning goal in the sense that the governmental support is extended to the voluntary sector as well, both in the field of implementation as well as policy formulation. The women greatly strengthen the impact of political movements dominated by men not just by their numbers, but by providing new energy, insights, leadership, and strategies. Besides, the struggles of women’s groups for access to material resources and knowledge directly benefit the men and children of their families and their communities, by opening the door to new ideas and better quality of life. (SIRD, 2005).

The overall development in the empowerment mission of the country calls for integration of various sectors and all sections of the society. The development process of different aspects cannot be segregated from one another. It has to be a comprehensive effort of all the people irrespective of class, colour, or area. But in
many societies today, a form of delineation and segregation from the mainstream has been noticeable particularly for women folk. In this context, the success of the mission has become challenging in Assam due to its wide physical and socio-cultural diversity added by the dominance of some problems social groups like Schedule Tribe, Schedule Caste, Char community and Tea garden community.

1.2 Review of Literature

Review of literature is presented in the context of International status, National status and Regional status.

1.2.1 International Status

Studies pertaining to women issues have assumed great importance during the last two decades throughout the world. From 1975-1985 periods the study and research oriented towards various issues and problems concerning women have come to be known as ‘feministic research’. At present it has become one of the central themes of study in social sciences. Research works on women gained ground when the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) formally constitutes the ‘women and Geography study Group’ in 1982.

Thoughts and contributory works in this field as initiated by the sociologist, economist, anthropologist and demographers have quite significant. Although studies in this line is found in disaggregated form in the early part of the present century, a systematic problem-oriented study and research have been began only from-1975, when the United Nations declared the period 1975-1985 as the ‘International Decade of women’. In recent times, Gender and development taken together is emerging as a progressive approach. In this respect various phenomena leading towards the understanding of the subject are found to be so wide in nature
that they encompass various disciplines into it under the umbrella of Interdisciplinary approach.

In three separate papers published in the professional geographer, while one strongly argued for the study of the gender issues in geography (Monk and Hanson, 1982), other two attempted to determine the socio-economic status of women to show the regional variation of the patterns in the world and the United States respectively by using meaningful indicators (Andrews, 1982, Lee and Schultz, 1982). These are essentially conceptual and methodological contributions towards understanding the status of women both in absolute and relative terms. De Lauretis has elaborated of the concepts and the social facts of gender study (De Lauretis, 1987). Gender distinctions are not accidental or a fact of nature but are reproduced institutionally (Epstein, 1988).

Longwe (1989, 1991) propounded a framework on Women’s empowerment which is popularly known as ‘Longwe Empowerment Process Framework’. He discussed empowerment through (i) welfare: The level of material welfare of women, relative to men in such matters as food supply, income and medical care. (ii) access: women's access to the factors of production: land, labour, credit, training, marketing facilities and all publicly available services and benefits on an equal basis with men; (iii) conscientisation: The understanding of the difference between sex roles and gender roles, and that the latter are cultural and can be changed; (iv) participation: Women's equal participation in the decision-making process, policymaking, planning and administration. (v) equality of control: over the factors of production, and the distribution of benefits so that neither men nor women are in a position of dominance. Rowlands Power Relations Framework which was developed by Rowlands in 1997 modified by Nelson and Wright in
1996. According to them (i) power from within: individual changes in confidence and consciousness (ii) power to: increase in skills, abilities including earning an income, access to markets and networks (iii) power over: changes in power relations within households, communities and at macro-level (iv) power with: organisation of the powerless to enhance individual abilities and/or ability to challenge and change power relations.

Jakarta Declaration, 1994, New York, stated that Women represent fifty percent of population, make up thirty percent of the official labour force, perform sixty percent of all working hours, receive ten percent of the world income and own even less than one percent of the world property (Sahay, 1998). Many critical areas concerning for development of women were identified. ‘UNDP report indicates that while 67% of the world’s work is done by women, only 10% of global income is earned by women and a mere 1% of global property is owned by women.’. The Human Development Report 1995 as published by the UNDP with the theme ‘Gender and Human Development’ has further strengthened the field of feministic study in the world. ‘Human Development, if not engendered, is endangered’ is the simple but far reaching message of this Report.

Empowerment Index is based on eight indicators. (Schuler, Hashemi and Riley, 1997). Each indicators including a variety of specific actions or items (i) Freedom of mobility: based on a list of places the respondent had gone (the market, a medical facility, the movies, outside the village) with additional point if she had gone alone (ii) Ability to make small purchases: giving progressive points for purchasing small items used daily in food preparation for the family (kerosine oil, cooking oil, spices), small items for herself (hair oil, soap, Glass bangles), purchasing ice cream or sweets for children. Extra points were given if decisions
were normally made without asking the husband's permission, and if the purchases were made at least in part with money earned by the respondent herself. (iii) Ability to make larger purchases: one point was given for purchasing pots and pans, two points for children's clothing, three points for saris for herself and four for buying the family's daily food. An additional point was given for each category if the purchase was made at least in part with money earned by the respondent herself. (iv) Involvement in major household decisions: One point was given for making a decision (individually or jointly with the husband) within the past few years about house repair or renovation, one point for a decision to take in a goat to raise for profit, three points for deciding to lease land and four points for deciding to buy land, a boat or a bicycle rickshaw. (v) Relative freedom from domination by the family: The respondent was asked if, within the past year someone in the family had taken money from her against her will, taken land, jewelry or livestock from her against her will, prevented her from visiting her natal home or prevented her from working outside the home. (vi) Political and legal awareness: One point each was given for knowing the name of a local government official, a Member of Parliament, and the Prime Minister, and one point each for knowing the significance of registering a marriage and knowing the law governing inheritance. (vii) Involvement in political campaigning and protests: The respondent was classified as "empowered" if she had campaigned for a political candidate or had gotten together with others to protest: a man beating his wife, a man divorcing or abandoning his wife, unfair wages, unfair prices, misappropriation of relief goods, or high-handedness of police or government officials. (viii) Economic security and contribution to family support: a point was assigned if the woman owned her house or homestead land, a point for owning any productive asset, a point for having her
own cash savings and an additional point if the savings were ever used for business or money-lending. This statistical study was then followed up by a number of other more qualitative studies on issues such as domestic violence (1997b). Empowerment framework considers the following changes leading to women empowerment (Chen, 1997) like a) Material Change: (i) Income: increased income and income security (ii) Resources: increased access to, control over, and ownership of assets and income (iii) Basic needs: increased or improved health care, child care, nutrition, education, housing, water supply, sanitation and energy source (iv) Earning capacity: increased employment opportunities plus ability to take advantage of these opportunities. b) Perceptual Change: (i) Self-esteem: enhanced perception of own individuality, interest and value (ii) Self-confidence: enhanced perception of own ability and capacities (iii) Vision of future: increased ability to think ahead and plan for the future (iv) Visibility and respect: increased recognition and respect for individual’s value and contribution. C) Relational Change: (i) Decision-making: increased role in decision-making within the household and community (ii) Bargaining power: increased bargaining power (iii) Participation: increased participation in non-family groups, in local institutions, in local government, in political process (iv) Self-reliance: reduced dependence on intermediation by others for access to resources, markets, public institutions plus increased ability and ability to act independently (v) Organizational strength: increased strength of local organizations and local leadership.

The empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development of countries all over the world. These issues of gender equality are discussed in world conferences, National and International conferences etc. In order to give a fillip to empowerment of women and appropriate institutional
mechanisms and interventions have been consciously built into the development design. (Ranjula 2003).

A basic gender principle was discussed by Linda Mayoux in September, 2005. According to her gender means Gender is a social construct and can be changed. Gender means both women and men, Gender means changing inequality. According to her Women’s Empowerment is a process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity. This will include support for men to change those aspects of their behaviour, roles and privileges which currently discriminate against women. The extent of current disadvantage and inequality means that women’s empowerment may require support by development agencies at household, community and macro levels.

1.2.2 National Status

In National level after 1975 the premier research organization, the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) decided to support research on women-specifically policy-oriented studies, reexamination of social science theories- and to revive the debate on the women question. The first National conference on women’s Studies in 1981 laid down the objectives of Women’s studies as the pursuit of more comprehensive, critical understanding of social reality. The late Eighties and Nineties were fraught with new challenges for both academics and activists. Quite a few studies in the Nineties concentrated on an analysis of structuring of caste and community identity, women’s agency in conflicting situations and the use of cultural symbols to perpetuate patriarchal values.
In India, however, significant contributions encompassing varied aspects of women have been made by a group of educationists, sociologist, economist, and anthropologist, since the beginning of the eighties. In this context some of women research Scientists is Khan and Ayesha in1982, Usha Rao in1985, Desai and Krishnaraj in1987, Banerjee in1985, Dube et al. in1986, Mahila Vikas Sangh in1988, Karkal and Pandey in1989, Arputhamurthy in1990, and Singh et al in1988 may be considered worth mentioning. Another latest but most outstanding work undertaken by Mahavevan in1989 has to a large extent strengthened the foundation of women research in India. In two different works Raju and Kumar in1989 and Kumar in 1994 attempted to focus the gender issues and its approaches both in national and international perspectives. The contributions made in recent time by Ahmed in1993, Bhagat in1993, Raju in1993 and Kumar in1993 are worth mentioning in this regard.

Women constitute nearly half of the rural population in India and play a vital role in the rural economy. Poverty when defined as degree of deprivation from the basic necessities, conveniences and amusements of human life visualizes that women living below the poverty line in the rural areas are said to be suffering from double deprivation. As members of a poor family, poor women are deprived from certain necessities. Again she is also deprived from some other necessities just because she is a woman. Research studies have found intra-household disparities in the availability of basic necessities. Women are normally the victims of such type of disparities. This awful situation of women in the world is also true to Indian women and particularly to rural women. Women are mostly engaged in household activities which are not considered “economic” and therefore, do not get counted as workers under conventional measures of employment. (Batra, 1996)
The major difficulties encountered by women in self-employment activities are to access the credit markets and technical skills. Customary law and convention in most areas precluded women from claiming family assets. Women empowerment is a process, which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Women’s empowerment can be viewed as a continuum of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing components.

Nagia (1997), in a study on ‘Population –Development Nexus’ rightly emphasized the positive role of women in environment friendly development. The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the source of power, may be termed as empowerment. This broad definition is defined by feminist scholars activist within the context of their own regions. (Batliwala, 1994). For instance, the term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance. Protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systemic forces that oppress them, but to change existing power relationships. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context (Sharma 1991-1992). Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance (Chandra, 1997).

The National perspective plans for women 1988-2000 AD (1988) which has made a free, frank and objective analysis of the impact of developmental plans and programmes of Indian women, with special reference to rural women. (Sahay,
1998). The government of India made empowerment of women as one of the principal objectives of the Ninth Five year plan (1997-2002) and also declared 2001 as the year of ‘women’s empowerment’. Our constitution has conferred and guaranteed equality before law, universal adult franchise and equal opportunities for man and women as fundamental rights. (Ranjula, 2003).

1.2.3 Regional Status

In North East India studies on gender geography are still in an embryonic stage. Some meso level works on socio-political role of women and socio-economic status of women in North East India, especially Assam, carried out by researchers like Das (1979), Saikia (1987), Kakati (1990), Rahman (1991), Barthakur (1993), Baruah (1993), Devi (1994) and Singha (2001) are worth mentioning. Anichary (1989) and Bora (1990) have also touched upon the socio-economic conditions of tribal women in their studies on ‘Social Geography of Nagaland’ and Population of Siang Region of Arunachal Pradesh’ respectively.

But most of these works are based on descriptive analysis of the problems of women in historical and sociological perspective. A very few works contain empirical data. Again, all these studies lack spatial perspective in the analyses. In Assam, Sharma’s contributions (1985, 1992, 1993) to establish the foundation of gender-related research in geography since the mid-eighties have been quite significant. Considering literacy and educational levels being the vital at dimensions of social development of women, he made three valuable works at meso level to examine the spatial pattern of literacy and education of women (Kar, 2002). Kar B.K. with Sharma H.N (1994) analyzed the ‘Spatial pattern of women literacy in Assam’ and tried to identify the educationally depressed zones in the
state. (Kar, 2002) discussed in detail about the socio-economic characteristics of women population in North East India which play a very significant role in gender geography. Works on socio-economic aspects of women population covering the entire North East are still in an initial stage. Besides, no comprehensive work has so far been done to find out the position of women in any part of the region both in the spatial and social terms.

1.3 The Present Study

Keeping the above perspective in view, the present study attempts to make a comparative analysis on the status of women and empowerment in rural areas among the identified social groups viz. Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe, Char Community, General caste and Tea garden community of Kamrup District, Assam.

1.4 Research Questions:

Following research questions have been formulated to address the objectives set for in

(a) Is there any difference in the status of women among different social groups viz. Schedule Tribe, Schedule Caste, Char community, General and Tea garden community?

(b) Is there any variation in women empowerment with respect to education, economy and health among the various social groups in the study areas?

(c) What is the relationship between the decision making capacity of women various aspects of women empowerment with regard to education, economy and health?
(d) Do the Self-Help-Groups differ in functioning in terms of formation, adoption of economic activities and performance level?

(e) Is there any inter relationship among the variables across the three sections of women empowerment viz. education, economy and health?

1.5 Objectives

The study aims at discussing:

- A comparative analysis on status of women belonging to different social groups with respect to socio economic indicators related to women.
- The variation of decision making capacity of women among the identified social groups.
- The women empowerment with respect to educational aspects and their variation among the social groups.
- The relation between the variables with respect to education and the decision making capacity of women.
- The formation of women Self Help Groups (SHG), adoption of economic activities and technological development of women.
- The economic empowerment of women and its variation across different social groups.
- The relationship between the economic variables and the decision making capacity of women.
- The women empowerment with respect to health and to see the variation among the social groups.
The relationship between the health variables and the decision making capacity of women

The interrelationship among all the variables across the three sectors of women empowerment viz. education, economic and health

The political empowerment of women among the various social groups

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study carries its significance as it deals with women and empowerment which is a new inclusion in the arena of gender geography in this part of the country. The data base generated in the study may be used by the decision makers for local level planning and development. The study will pave light for further research activities on women empowerment. The interdisciplinary relevance of the study has an emerging role to play in the academic arena.

1.7 Organization of the Thesis

The first chapter deals with the introduction, Statement of the problem, Review of literature with International status, National status and regional status, Significance of the study, objectives and research questions.

The second chapter discusses the methodology and data base with special reference to sampling plan, sampling tools and techniques, design of survey schedule viz-household survey schedule, self-help-group survey schedule and survey schedule for gaon panchayats women, selection of the sample villages from the identified C.D. blocks using Composite Z-scores and status of women in the villages of the identified C.D. blocks in terms of socio-economic indicators.
The third chapter pertains to an overview of the geographical understanding of the C. D. blocks. The discussion is made under two sections. The first section deals with the physical setting like – relief, geology, soil, drainage, climate, natural vegetation and flora and fauna. The second section illustrates cultural setting on the basis of agriculture, infrastructural facilities like – transport and communication, educational facility, health facility, drinking water facility etc. The cultural setting further includes the demographic profile like- growth of population, density of population, description of the identified social groups, and occupational structure of the respective blocks.

The fourth chapter deals with the Educational empowerment of women with reference to women literacy rate, gender gap in literacy, the educational attainment and age wise educational level of the women members in the sample villages. The chapter further discusses access to developmental programmes related to educational empowerment of women, access to various facilities under educational empowerment schemes, access to rights at home and decision making capacity of women with respect to Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and correlation matrix have been employed in the study.

The fifth chapter is meant for discussing the economic empowerment of women. The chapter is sectioned with women work participation rate of the identified C.D. blocks. Here discussion is also made on access to developmental programmes related to economic empowerment of women, concepts and functioning of self-help-group, access to micro-credit, access to subsidy, adoption of economic activities, access to training programmes and impact of Self-Help-Groups in the empowerment as perceived by women respondents. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and correlation matrix have been employed to observe the
governing factors and interrelated phenomena in economic empowerment of women.

The sixth chapter is devoted to the study of the political empowerment of women with respect to Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam, Assam panchayats act 1994, reservation for women, participation of women in the gaon panchayats, with respect to religion, caste, age, marital status and education and their leadership level. The chapter also discusses the awareness level of the gaon panchayats women, awareness of basic knowledge in political field, awareness on social weaknesses, participation in gaon panchayats and difficulties faced by the women members.

The seventh chapter illustrates women empowerment with respect to health. In this chapter discussion is made on access to facilities related to health, access to health centers, marital status marriage age and health, women as home maker, access to developmental programmes on health for empowering women, women and motherhood; reproductive health of women and status of certain health parameters as perceived by women respondents. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and correlation matrix have been employed to observe the influencing factors in women empowerment with respect to health.

The eight chapter is devoted for drawing the summery and conclusion.

1.8 Definitions of certain terms behind the problem to be addressed

- Schedule Caste (SC) is socio-economically backward community recognized in the Indian Constitution living scattered in Assam.
Schedule Tribe (ST) means the tribes which are recognized in the Indian constitution living both in hills and plains.

Tea Garden Labours / Adibasi Tea community are those who work in Tea gardens, the large revenue generating industry in Assam. When Tea garden started in Assam, the British planters recruited labourers from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritages of other provinces of India. These immigrants are tribes and caste groups of Santhals, Mundas, Khonds, Orons, Kharias, Gonds, Khshans and Nagerias known as Adibasi Tea community.

Char community are those habitant in few district of Assam living particularly in riverine sandbars and mostly includes immigrants from nearby countries.

Literates: A person aged 7 years and above who can both read and write with understanding in any language has been taken as literates.

Work: Work is defined as participation in any economically productive activity with or without compensation, wages or profit. Such participation may be physical and/or mental in nature.

Work participation Rate is defined as the percentages of total workers (main + marginal) to total population.

Main workers (MW) - Those workers who had worked for the major part of the reference period (i.e. 6 months or more) are termed as main workers.

Marginal workers (MGW) - Those workers who had not worked for the major point of the references period (i.e. less than 6 months) are termed as marginal workers.
- Cultivators (Cu) - Who he or she is engaged in cultivation of land owned or held from Government or held from private persons or institutions.

- Agricultural labours (AL) - A person who works on another person’s land for wages in money or kind or share is regarded as an agricultural labourer.

- Household Industry workers (HHIW) - Household Industry is defined as an industry conducted by one or more members of the household at home or within the village in rural areas. The larger proportion of workers in the household industry consists of members of the household. The industry is not run on the scale of a registered factory which has to be registered under the Indian Factories Act. Household industry relates to production, processing, servicing, repairing or making and selling (but not merely selling of goods).

- Other Workers (OW) – Who have been engaged in some economic activity, but are not cultivators or agricultural labourers or in household Industry.