

CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history women have made significant contribution towards the growth, development and sustainability of human society as a whole. In tribal communities, women play an integral and important role in society and substantially contribute towards the economy. Assam, situated to the northeast of India, consists of diverse ethnic races and tribes. Of them, the Boros occupy a dominant position in terms of being one of the largest tribal groups in Assam. Women of the Boro community played a dominant role in their tribal society and economy of pre-colonial Assam. They had been a major working force in their tribal economy and they were influential to a large extent in both the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ spheres of Boro society. The establishment of the colonial rule in the nineteenth century India produced profound effects and it set in motion a chain of events which brought radical changes in political, social and economic scenario of the nation. The British administration, work of Christian missionaries and the socio-religious reform movements of the country moulded the lives of people in general and women in particular. In Assam the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked an era of important developments and in turn impacted women’s roles, privileges and gender relations in the Boro tribal society and economy of colonial Assam.

Gender differentials have characterised almost all societies and almost at all times. Gender inequalities are found in the way families socialize their children, arrange and conduct marriages and the ways by which economic and political institutions overtly or covertly deny opportunities for women empowerment. The degree and

type of gender differences may vary from society to society and from time to time but they have been very systematically carried forward from one generation to the other in all the societies.¹ In considering gender relations, it needs to be stated as to in what ways Boro society is different from other tribal societies of the northeast; rather the society's unique features as related to gender. Although Boro society is patriarchal² with features of patriliney³, as well as patrilocality⁴, it is interesting to find certain matriloal⁵ and matrilineal⁶ features within this patriarchy. This to a large extent explains the dominant role of the Boro woman in particular domains, such as in socio-religious rites, and her subordination in others, e.g. political participation. Besides discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, mother, the domestic chores, social obligations and economic activities, the Boro woman is, in the main, a compulsory contributor to family income. This factor in itself makes her contribution to society and economy, most significant. However, this aspect slowly deteriorated during the colonial period, marginalising the position of Boro women.

As a background to this perspective, it is important to understand the implications of the word 'tribe', which is a colonial construct emerging out of the so-called concept of 'white man's burden'. The word 'tribe', which appeared in the thirteenth century in the Middle English literature, has a Latin derivation from

¹ George Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera: *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies Vol. I*, Concept Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 170-171.

² A social system where the father is the head of the family and male members have authority over women and children.

³ A system in which one belongs to one's paternal lineage. It generally involves inheritance of property, names or titles through the male line.

⁴ A social pattern of post-nuptial residence, where the bride after marriage, moves to the groom's house.

⁵ A social custom or culture in which the husband goes to live with the wife's family.

⁶ Tracing descent only through the maternal lineage.

Tribus, meaning the tripartite divisions of the early Romans.⁷ The Dictionary of Social Sciences defines the term 'tribe' as 'a set of people theoretically of a common descent, an aggregate of families, forming a community or a race with a common territory, common language, common beliefs and having primitive ways of living'.⁸

The category of 'tribe' first found mention in the first census of British India in 1871, although without any proper definition. The British administrators-turned ethnographers and anthropologists treated the tribal people as 'isolates', 'warlike' and 'savages', so as to legitimize the subordination of the 'colonized' to the 'colonizer'.⁹ It was conditioned by the British imperatives to politically control the natives especially after the Revolt of 1857 and to organize an enhancement in the revenue collection.¹⁰ Thus, in the colonial context the term 'tribe' implied the notion of 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness' and the need to be civilized or transformed. These were the imperatives which portrayed the tribal people of Northeast India as 'barbarians'. The Government of India Act 1935 used the term 'Backward Tribes'. The Indian Constitution 1950 has retained the terminology of 1935 Act with a slight alteration using 'Scheduled' instead of 'Backward'. Article 366 (25) defines scheduled tribes as 'such tribes or tribal communities or parts of

⁷ *The New Encyclopaedia of Britannica Vol. X*, U.S.A., 1978, p.115-116.

⁸ B.B. Sharma: *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sociology, Vol. 4*, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1992, p. 1013.

⁹ Alexander Mackenzie: *The North East Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 6-8.

¹⁰ Shiv Kumar Tiwari: *Encyclopaedia of Indian Tribal Vol. I*, Rahul Publishing House, Delhi, 1994, pp.10-13.

or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purpose of this constitution'.¹¹

Though the term 'tribe' is a colonial construct, it has its own notion. According to the Imperial Gazetteer: 'A tribe is a collection of families, bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous though originally it might have been.'¹² Tribes in general have certain basic characteristics. Many clans constitute a tribe which shares a common geographical territory and each tribe traces its descent from a real or mythical ancestor. They have blood relationship, a common language and culture. A tribe has its own political organization with a Chief at its head. The tribal political and social laws are often guaranteed by religious sanctity and recognition.¹³

The Boro tribe, with which the present study is concerned, was one of the early settlers of Assam. They were an important off-shoot of the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock. There is a controversy regarding the nomenclature of the Boro tribe as they have been designated by various names in different parts of the state- in the Brahmaputra Valley as 'Boro' or 'Bodo', in the North Cachar Hills as 'Dimasa', in North Bengal and Jalpaiguri Districts of West Bengal and Goalpara District of Assam as Mech or Boro, while elsewhere in Assam as 'Kacharis'. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee describes them as the Indo-Mongoloids, who were known as the *Kiratas*

¹¹ H.C Upreti and Nandita Upreti: *Women and Problems of Gender Discrimination*, Pointer Publishers, Jaipur, 2000, p.162.

¹² S.G. Deogaonkar : *Tribal Administration and Development: With Ethnographic Profiles of Selected Tribes*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1994, p.14.

¹³ Rajendra Kr. Sharma: *Indian Society- Institutions and Change*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 145-146.

during the Epic and the Vedic age.¹⁴ Brian H. Hodgson was the first British author to give the generic name to this community while referring to their various customs and further stated that tribes like ‘Mech’, ‘Rabha’ and ‘Lalung’ belong to the same family.¹⁵ However, Endle in his book *The Kacharis* calls them as ‘Kachari’ and traces their original home to Tibet and China from where they had migrated to Assam in two waves.¹⁶ According to Gait, Kacharis (Boros) are closely allied to the ‘Koches’, ‘Chutias’, ‘Lalungs’ and ‘Morans’ of the Brahmaputra valley and to the ‘Garos’ and ‘Tipperas’ of the southern hills.¹⁷ Regarding the original home of the Bodo-kachari, Rajmohan Nath observes that they came from Tibet and that the word *Bodo* has been derived from the word *Bod* which means homeland or Tibet. They were known as *Boddo-Ficha* or *Boddo-cha* i.e. children of *Bod* country and later simply as the *Boddo* or the *Bodo*.¹⁸ In Boro-Kachari language, as pointed out by Ramdas Basumatary, the etymological meaning of the term *Boro* is ‘men’ by which *Bara* or *Baraphisa* (children of the *Bara*) could be justified.¹⁹ Another possibility is that the name of the tribe might have been derived from the word *bara* which in Assamese language means ‘pig’. Since the people of this tribe were engaged in domestication of pigs or *bara* it brings the possible ground for nomenclature of the ‘Boro’ tribe. The word ‘Bodo’ is the English version of ‘Boro’ and it was first used by British authors like Hodgson and Buchanan Hamilton.

¹⁴ S.K. Chatterjee: *Kirata-Jana-Kriti: The Indo-Mongoloids; Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1974, p.38.

¹⁵ G.A. Gierson : *Linguistic Survey of India vol. III, part-II*, 1967, p.1.

¹⁶ Sidney Endle: *The Kacharis*, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1975, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ Sidney Endle: op.cit., pp.3-4.

¹⁸ R.M. Nath: *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Dutta Baruah & Company, Guwahati, 1978, p.16.

¹⁹ Ramdas Basumatari: “Some Ideas on Bathou” in *Bodosa*, Bodo Sahitya Sabha Souvenir, edited by M.R. Mochahari, 1980, pp. 27-30.

Besides, the term *Boro* has also been used by the people of the tribe as their surname. Hence, in the thesis the term Boro has been used to refer the tribe.

Before the advent of the Ahoms, the Boros held sway in Assam (ancient Kamrupa) for a considerable period of time which is testified by the fact that in Boro-Kachari language, *di* means 'water' and apparently most of the rivers of Assam starts with the Kachari syllabi like *Dibru*, *Dihing*, *Diku*, etc. Similarly, the suffix *sri* which is found in many rivers of Assam is also believed to be of Boro origin. With the advent of the Ahoms, they were displaced and hence they inhabit in different pockets of the state.

Towards a better understanding of the role of Boro women in tribal society and economy, it is important to understand the gender differentiation in societies in general, and tribal societies in particular. The whole human race is divided into two broad categories- men and women. It is universal that every human society is characterized by social differentiation. Social differentiation based on gender is one form. It is particularly maintained in the division of labour by sex, though the rules for allocating different activities to men and women vary from society to society. Before going into any further discussion on the gender question, it is important to understand the meaning of the terms viz. 'sex', 'gender' and 'gender differentiation'. 'Sex' refers to the biological functions of individuals'.²⁰ 'Gender' in general, refers to the psychological and social ramifications of having masculine and feminine qualities.²¹ While 'gender differentiation' means different roles and activities which the culture and society have assigned to men and women. However, the biological division of male and female is reflected in the cultural

²⁰ B.B. Sharma: *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sociology, Vol. 4*, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1992, p. 857.

²¹ B.B. Sharma: *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sociology, Vol. 2*, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 361-362.

norms as well. In consideration of the inherent capabilities and skills, which are typical of gender, men and women are assigned specific roles in the social set-up.²² In tribal societies, on the other hand, which are known for their egalitarian nature, gender differentiation is quite noticeable particularly in the division of labour by sex. In the Boro society women were entitled to activities like child rearing, kitchen activities, washing clothes, weaving, collecting firewood, health of the family members, various agricultural and allied activities etc. While men were expected to go for hunting, house building and agricultural activities. This division of labour on the basis of biological sex is based on what a society expects a man or a woman should do. It values the products of male labour more than those of women, thereby compounding gender discrimination or differentiation.

After analyzing the works of scholars on the question of gender roles, it is apparent that the belief that men and women should occupy different social and economic roles is based on certain assumptions. The first assumption is that men and women have different levels of physical strength. Even in the early stages of life because of more physical strength and energy than women, men went for hunting, felling of trees, fighting with the beasts etc. while women were confined to the collection of firewood and gathering of food. The second assumption is what Sherry Ortner has brought forward while she traces the cause of universal degradation of women. She says women are identified with or symbolically associated with nature. Their physical features like her reproductive ability and other natural processes are viewed as being closely associated with nature. Men are identified with culture. It has always been that culture attempts to control and transcend nature. If women

²² Ann Oakley: *Sex, Gender and Society*, Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., London: Gower, 1985, pp. 152-156.

were considered as part of nature then men who are identified with culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate them. Culture is, therefore, superior to the natural world and seeks to mark out or 'socialize' nature, in order to regulate and maintain relationship between society and forces and conditions of the environment.²³The third assumption is which labels women's work as domestic work and men's work as productive work. It is the distinction made between women's so-called domestic work and men's extra-domestic work, so-called productive work that designates men as 'public' and 'valuable' while women as 'domestic' and 'less valuable'. Fourthly, it is generally believed that women have less economic role since maternity, motherhood and other related activities to child rearing consumed a considerable period of years and obstruct her contribution to economic growth. The above stated four assumptions provide the ground for the fifth assumption that women are more suitable to do household domestic activities as it requires low energy level while men are more apt for outdoor productive work.

However, to all the above assumptions, Boro women presented an altogether different picture. They had an access to land, forest and natural resources. They had a major role in the various social and economic activities of their tribal society. With great muscular strength and developed hand and calf muscles, women could carry loads over long distances. In fact till a baby reached the age of 3-4 years, a Boro mother would carry the child on her back, tightened by a cloth around the child and knotted in front of her chest, while performing all the activities of daily life.

²³ Sherry Ortner: "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" in *Women, Culture and Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Louise Lamphere, Joan Babengers, Stanford University Press, California, 1974, p. 73.

This brings to the question as to whether the determinants of male and female and masculine and feminine are the same. Generally, a male is said to be masculine when he acts according to the socio-culturally defined supposedly gender ways and a female to be feminine must act according to the socio-culturally constructed gender ways, since, these determinants of masculinity and femininity are constructed by the society and culture. Thus, to be a male or female is determined by birth but to be masculine or feminine must be determined by attitude, behavioural traits and personality, independent of sex.²⁴ The gender differentiation in recognizing different social and economic roles is rather cultural than biological. It becomes clear when we analyze the contribution of Boro women towards their local society and economy.

The Boros being intensively clannish people represented the basic features of a tribal society and economy of colonial Assam, where in the Boro women played a dominant role. For an analysis of women's subordination and dominance in pre-colonial tribal society and economy, it is essential to understand the socio-economic conditions of the tribe at that time.

Traditionally, a tribal society consisted of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious or blood ties with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader. Some tribes are particularly egalitarian and most tribes have a verge notion of private property. They have their own customary laws and a belief in common lineage.²⁵ Thus, tribal societies are small in scale,

²⁴ Ann Oakley: op.cit, pp. 158-171.

²⁵ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 6th Edition, Vol. II*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 3340-3341.

restricted to the spatial and temporal range of their social, legal and political lineage and possess a religion, a morality and worldview of corresponding dimensions.²⁶

At the same time, tribal societies exhibit a remarkably compact and self-sufficient economy which is lacking in modern society. Tribal economy has to be understood as an economic system of a particular tribe in which its members produce and consume as well as distribute the material means to satisfy their individual and collective needs. Thus, in primitive economy the *de facto* control over the means of production is decentralized, local and familial. The structural level at which the tribal economy operates is quite different from modern economy.²⁷ Here, the producers themselves are the consumers. In tribal economy simple and primitive techniques of production are adopted. As far as the distribution is concerned it is through the nature of barter system and it is basically a non-monetized economy. Most of the economic transactions are within the community which are governed by tradition and custom than any market consideration. The spirit of mutual co-operation is all pervading.

Society and economy are interdependent of each other. The type of society reflects the form of economy and vice-versa. One of the most distinguishing features in tribal social and economic setup is the role of women, where they play a distinctive role. In the Boro community which reflects all the basic features of tribal society and economy, the Boro women made important contributions.

²⁶ I.M. Lewis: "Tribal Society" in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 16, edited by David L. Sills, Macmillan Publishers, New York, 1968, pp147-150.

²⁷ Shahlins Marshall: "Political Power and the Economy in Primitive Society" in *Essays in the Science of Culture*, ed. G.E. Dole and R.L. Carneino, New York, 1960 as quoted by Colin Bundy: *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, James Currey Publishers, London, 1988, p. 15.

In the social Boro structure there was no such things as caste system or social stratification. The tribe was divided into many sub-tribes, each name ending with *ari*. Their totemistic clan system called the *Mahari* was based on occupation. However, there were certain clans which were named after places. Scholars like Endle²⁸, Narzi²⁹ and Brahma³⁰ have given a detailed account of the functions of different clans. Vocational clans included *Swargiari* (heavenly folk), *Basumatari* or *Baisamatari* (earthy folk), *Narziari* or *Narzari* (jute folk), *Mosahari* (tiger folk), *Daimari* (fisherman), *Owari* (bamboo folk), *Lahari* (leaves folk), *Sibingari* (sesam folk), *Gayari* (areca nut folk), *Bingiari* (player of *bingi* instrument), *Bigariari* (begging folk)etc. While some clans like *Hajoari*, *Ramchiary* and *Maomarari* were named after places of *Hajo*, *Ramsa* and *Maomari* respectively. These clan names are still prevalent in the Boro society though the occupation criterion no longer exists. Although, there was no caste system in the then Boro society, gender differentiation could be seen between men and women in certain spheres. Regarding the social role of the Boro women in the colonial period, it can be studied under three heads viz. Family responsibility, Social rites and festivals, and Religious ceremonies.

Boro women had close integration with the natural environment which was reflected in the application of their indigenous knowledge in all domestic, social and economic activities. Their significant contribution could be seen in their skills of managing and conserving biodiversity. Women cooked food and also preserved meat, fish and vegetables, thereby contributing to conserving biodiversity by transforming raw

²⁸ Sidney Endle : op.cit., pp.24-27.

²⁹ Bhaben Narzi: *Boro-Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1971, p.99.

³⁰ Kameswar Brahma : *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Bodos (With Special Reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District)*, Punthi Pustak , Calcutta, 1992, pp.35-44.

materials into processed items. Production of rice-beer or *zau* or *madh* by Boro women is again common practice with almost all tribes of the north-eastern region, and the Boros were no exception. They had traditional medical knowledge of curing diseases, although in the end it was the *Oja* or medicine man who provided traditional cure. Women maintained a garden of locally available medicinal herbs in the household compound, and also prepared medicine to provide relief of some ailments. They collected medicinal herbs, flowers and roots from the forests. Boro women also served as midwives or nurses at the time of birth. Women thus played a significant role as caregivers and midwives. At the same time it is to be noted that although traditional knowledge lies with them, including growing the medicinal herbs, it is ultimately the *Oja*, a man, that takes over the credit of cure.

Women were 'visible' at the social functions and religious rites. In the entire marriage process from pre to post marriage ceremony, women played a major role. Mention has to be made of *Bairathis*: the two selected Boro girls or ladies called *Bairathis* or *Bairathi jora*. They belonged to the groom's side and could never be replaced by men. In the *Biban Langnai* or *bhar* in Assamese and *Hinjao godan laina thangnai* or bringing the bride to groom's house for marriage the *Bairathis* had a significant role. Again, in the rituals concerning cultivation like *Amtisua*, *Khotia Phonai*, *Baisagu* etc and in religious sphere, Boro women played an important role. The main centre of attraction in the *Kherai Puja* was the *Doudini* or *Deodhai* in Assamese, dance performance during the *puja*. In fact, without *Doudini*, there could be no *Kherai Puja*. A *Doudini* was always a woman and could never be replaced by a man.

In the economic sphere, Boro women were the major driving force. Agriculture was the main source of livelihood. They practiced *jhoom* or hoe and subsistence cultivation. Boro women shared the work equally with men in the field. It is of interest to note that all female members of a family were often the owners of cattle, poultry, piggery, etc of the family. Granary (*Bakhri*) which symbolized the economic condition of the family was kept under the custody of the wife or daughters. Even the father, who was the head of the family, could not utilize livestock or stocked paddy for which he had to take the permission of female members. In fact in most of the tribal communities of North-East India like the Karbis, the responsibility of looking after poultry and granary is generally assigned to women. Women's expertise in fishing, weaving and rearing of cocoons also speak of women-nature relationship. Women took the leading part in fishing. They mainly used implements like *Zakhoi* and *Palha* and *khaloi* to store fish. All these implements were made by themselves. They were expert weavers and wove the *Dokhna*, *Phashra*, and *Jumra*. They reared cocoons and produced rayon *endi*, *aranoi* etc. Art of dyeing yarn with colours prepared from various roots and leaves of trees was also known them. Boro Women also used to go to the *haats* or local *Bazar* to sell vegetables and local products such as articles made of bamboo eggs etc. These *haats* or local *bazaars* served as a social institution. The income that the Boro women earned from engaging in various economic activities were used to manage the required expenses for garments and to tide over the family crises. Even the male members used to barter with the female-owned and prepared goods at the *haats*, such as animals and other articles. This is, however, noticeable among most of the tribes of North-East India like *Karbi*, *Tiwa*, *Adi*, *Nishi* etc. where

women spend their earned money in other family requirements when needed and their men sell goods produced by women in markets.

Despite the immense contribution of women towards the tribal society and economy, yet in all spheres viz. household, social and economic, differentiation based on gender between men and women could be noticed in the Boro community of colonial Assam. Women's participation in the village *Panchayat* called *Raijani Metheng* was also nominal.

However, **the British colonial dominance of Assam from 1826 to 1947 impacted some changes in the power relations of Boro society.** In the colonial period **four forces** were responsible for influencing this change. While the Christian missionaries and the British Government were colonial agencies, the *Brahma Dharma* and Boro women were native agencies. Thus, the British colonial dominance of Assam from 1826 to 1947 impacted some changes in the power relations of Boro society. The first being the Christian missionaries who in order to spread their message of Christianity encouraged education among Boro women and preached health and hygiene. The second agency was the emergence of *Brahma Dharma* in the first decade of the twenty century. The propagator was Kalicharan Brahma, designated as the *Guru*, who preached monotheism i.e. worshipping Lord Brahma in the form of fire and emphasized on *Yojanahuti*. It was a socio-religious reform movement. The third was administrative changes, introduction of money economy and various reforms introduced by the British in the Goalpara District. The fourth and important agent of change was the Boro women themselves. After being influenced by the three colonial agencies, women themselves came to the forefront and attempted to bring reforms and work towards

the emancipation of women in Boro society. Thus the colonial and native agencies significantly contributed to the task of reforming the Boro tribal society and with particular attention to women.

In analyzing the work of the agencies, it has been found that more or less each agency has affected the role of Boro women in different spheres. In a nutshell it can be said that, the socio-economic agencies had both positive and negative impact on Boro women of the time. The agencies of the colonial era did bring some changes in the socio-economic life of Boro people in general and women in particular, improving their lives by bringing awareness to their mind set. One of the most important impact of these agencies was that women emerged as the fourth important agent of socio-economic change. They also did not lag behind in the freedom struggle and participated in the national movement of India. But on the other hand women lost their importance in traditional social and economic roles which were now geared in favour of male members and thus began a process of alienation and marginalisation of women. They were alienated from their source of livelihood, indigenous knowledge, traditional social functions and economic means of production. It gave way to male hegemony in certain spheres where women earlier held authority. The net result of colonial modernity and *sanskritization* was that the 'gender differentiation' which existed in Boro society and economy became more deeper and wider, which in turn made the status of Boro women marginal and vulnerable. Thus, in colonial Assam, Boro women were not at par in the tribal society and economy with men.

A myth has been created about the equal status enjoyed by Boro women with men of their society. Most writers who have made an extensive study on the Boros

whether, Endle, Narzi, Bhattacharya, Brahma, Premalata Devi or others have tried to show that Boro women enjoyed an equal status with men. Particularly the concept of the prevalence of matriarchal characteristics in the patriarchal Boro society upheld by writers like Narzi and others provided a firm base to this myth. However, the existence of any known examples of human matriarchies at any point in history has been rejected by most of the modern sociologists and anthropologists. Nevertheless, by and large the theories of the writers on Boros, misconception of the prevalence of matriarchal features and general belief of the people have provided the ground for creating a myth centring round the question of equality of Boro women with male members of the society. The present study, therefore, attempts to critique this myth and refute the existence of matriarchal features by bringing into focus gender differentiation as maintained in the Boro tribal society and economy of colonial Assam.

The study area of this research is confined to present Kokrajhar District of undivided Goalpara of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The selection of the District is a representative sample for micro -level study that could furnish meaningful, varied and accurate information. A substantial Boro population have been inhabiting the region since pre-colonial times up to the present. Besides it has been the major territorial base of the tribe marking the coexistence of the followers of *Bathou Dharma*, Christianity and *Brahma Dharma*.

The word 'Goalpara' has been derived from *Gwaltippika* meaning *Guwali gaon* in Assamese and village of the milkmen in English. Goalpara was initially formed a part of the Rangpur district of Bengal. It then included the Garo Hills. However, on 12 August, 1765 by the Mughal Emperor's *farman*, Goalpara was transferred to the

English East India Company. Under the provisions of Regulation X of 1822, it was cut off from Rangpur and formed a separate district with headquarters at Goalpara³¹ (town with the same name of the District). After the British conquest of Assam it was transferred to Assam.

W.W. Hunter in his *Statistical Account of Assam*, described Goalpara as the most westerly District in the Chief Commissionership of Assam. It formed the entrance to the upper valley of Assam. It lies on both sides of the Brahmaputra river extending from 25° to 27° North Latitude and from 90° to 91° East Longitude. In 1866, the Eastern Duars were annexed to the district. The total area coverage of the district was 4,433 sq. miles. On the north, the district was bounded by the Bhutan Hills, on the south by the Garo Hills, on the east by Kamrup and on the west by the districts of Rangpur and Jalpaiguri and the state of Cooch Behar.³² By 1870's, Dhubri became the headquarter of the Goalpara district. The district can be broadly divided into two subdivisions- GOALPARA and DHUBRI.³³ After Independence, however, various small districts have been formed out of the greater Goalpara district viz. Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Chirang, Goalpara, Bongaigaon etc.

While **reviewing the literature on the topic**, it is found that the contribution of women has rarely been included in the writing of history and tribal women have received much less attention from historians. North-East India, being largely a tribal populated region, certain studies on women have been made particularly devoted to the tribal women of Nagas, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Khasis etc.

³¹ Edward Gait: *A History of Assam*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, 1926, p. 283.

³² W.W. Hunter: *A Statistical Account of Assam Vol. II*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati: Delhi, 1998, p. 17.

³³ B. C. Allen, E.A. Gait, C.G.H. Allen, H.F. Howard: *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2001, p. 516.

In the nineteenth century with the advent of the British in Assam, the Colonial Government encouraged ethnographic studies and various reports and articles were written on the tribes of North-East like *Garos*, *Kacharis*, *Nagas*, *Khasis* etc including the Boros. From the first decade of the twentieth century monographs on the various tribes of Assam were systematically and carefully prepared. The outstanding work which still stands as a milestone about the Boro tribe is **The Kacharis** (Cosmo Publication, 1975, Delhi), by **Sidney Endle**. It was first published in 1911. The book is the documentation of the author's forty years of acquaintance with the Kachari or Boro tribal people. Being a Chaplain of Tezpur for many years and in charge of the Kachari mission to propagate gospel of Christ in Himalayan foothills of North Bengal and Assam, his work gives the colonial perception of the tribes of north-east India. He has traced the origin of the Boros and made a detailed study of their domestic, social, religious and economic life. Their traditions, folklore and superstitions are also dealt with. It was the first to furnish a grammar of the Kachari language. The work also throws significant light, though occasionally on the role of Boro women in their tribal social, economic and religious spheres. He has mentioned the labour rendered by the Boro women in the agricultural field, their preparation of rice beer (*Zau*), Kachari women's leading role in fishing with the names of various processes and implements of fishing along with their excellence in weaving clothes and their role in various religious rites and customs. Endle expresses his view that the status of Kachari women is "far from a degraded one". However, his work did not provide a detailed analysis of Boro society. Description of the Kachari or Boro people as 'semi-savage folk' indicates the colonial concept of 'White Man's Burden' and 'superiority of the white race'. It becomes clearer in the author's observation of the Boro religion as being "created

out of fear which stood in contrast to Christianity”. The author has also at certain instances compared their traditional religious beliefs with Christianity. Unlike the rest of missionaries of the colonial period in Assam, who condemned the consumption of rice-beer, Sidney Endle surprisingly pointed out its good side as he observes rice-beer consumption has prevented the Kachari or Boro people from coming under the influence of Hinduism, which according to the author leads to “deterioration in conduct and character”. Although, the work describes the economic potentialities of Boro women, yet it does not recognize the prevalence of some matrilineal features like the *Dongkha* or widow remarriage. Nor there is any reference to the role of *Bairathis* (two selected females), who play a crucial role in the marriage ceremonies. While describing certain typical Boro social customs, the author has not used the Boro terms; for instance in place of *Phon Thaka* the word bride-price has been used throughout. Likewise, the proper naming of different types of Boro marriages is not given in the book.

Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti (Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1971) was first published in 1966. The book is an outstanding work of **Bhaben Narzi** and is written in Assamese language. It covers the various aspects of Boro-Kachari society and culture, in reference to the Boros of Assam and West Bengal. He begins by giving an Indo- Mongolian background to the origin of the Boro tribe and often compares the Boro rituals and customs with those of Tibet, Nepal and Sikkim. Although the writer has not clearly stated whether the Boros came from matriarchal or patriarchal society yet in his work Boro society has been depicted as a patriarchal society. Bhaben Narzi, who himself belonged to the Boro community has given a mythical background to almost all the practices of the

Boros relating to agriculture, hunting, preparation of rice beer etc., associated with Hindu gods and goddesses. Regarding the Boro women Narzi mentions the existence of 'some matriarchal features' in the society like *Dongka* or *Dhoka Haba* i.e. widow remarriage, *Garijailakhinai Haba* or marriage by servitude and the practice of demanding bride price or *phon* etc., and Boro women's performing work like weaving, agricultural work, preparing rice beer. At the same time he also mentions the various restrictions in various social and religious functions imposed on Boro women. However his work also fails to provide a comprehensible study of Boro women. Regarding women, one point that differentiates Endle and Narzi is that while Endle has established the predominance of Boro women over men in fishing practices, Bhaben Narzi is silent on the role of Boro women in the fishing practice.

Kameshwar Brahma in **A Study of Socio-religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos; with special reference to the Bodos of Kokrajhar District** (Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1992) has given a wide coverage on the study of the various aspects of Boro society (both traditional and customs of Brahma Dharma), their economic practices, religious rites and even Boro musical instruments. He has selected Kokrajhar area for his study. He mentions that the Boro society is patriarchal where various privileges are enjoyed by Boro women like women's custody over poultry, *Dhoka* system, *Garjia Lakhinai* system of marriage, bride price, Boro women as mid wives, weavers, preparation of rice beer and their role in various agricultural and social rituals. He also points out the exception where the Boro girl can enjoy property under *Garjia Lakhinai* system of marriage. Brahma has also mentioned the various restrictions imposed on Boro women, like their being denied of inheritance right to property and other social

restrictions. Another importance of this book is that, Brahma has devoted a whole chapter on the emergence of *Brahma Dharma* and the various changes that the movement was instrumental in bringing about in Boro society and economy and thereby affecting the role of the Boro women in various spheres. Brahma has also produced work on the same line like **A Study in Cultural Heritage of the Bodos** (1998) and **Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos** (1989). However, such works have not assessed the contribution of Boro women in a historical perspective.

In **The Social and Religious Institutions of Bodos** (Geophil Publishing House, Guwahati, 1998) **Premlata Devi** has given an account on the ethics, gods, Boro pattern of religion, *Boro* terms and society. She has mentioned about the distinctions maintained by the Boros between male and female deities. Her work also focuses on the relation between husband and wife of the Boro community. She has stated clearly that there are some 'matriarchal characteristics' in the patriarchal Boro society. She has mentioned both the customs of traditional society and the changes brought by *Brahma-Dharma*. Though she has mentioned the role of Boro women in society as weavers, she primarily devoted attention to the religious aspects of Boro society and the religious role of Boro women.

Sucheta Sen Choudhury in **The Bodo Movement and Women Participation** (Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 2004) traces the different social and economic roles played by the Boro women since ages and the women's participation in the Boro movement. Since it is a recent work it mainly deals with the role of Boro women in their movement initiated by the *Brahma Dharma* in the post- colonial period till the modern times. She refers to the Boro society and economy during

the British period and points out gender differentiation among the Boros only in child rearing and education.

Religion of the Bodos and their Socio Cultural Transition - A Historical Perspective by **Sekhar Brahma** (D.V.S. Publications, Guwahati, 2006) reveals the entire developmental process in religion, society, ethics, ethnic crisis etc as being interrelated and their roots were laid in the *Brahma Dharma* movement or the spread of Christianity in the early part of twentieth. Sekhar Brahma has stated the status Boro woman as high and throws light on their various social and cultural roles. The most important feature of his work is that it furnishes us information about the changes brought about in the Boros and Boro women by the *Brahma Dharma* and the Missionary activities. He however, ignores their role in economy.

The Bodo Children of Bhulumbutter (Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, Delhi, 1997) edited by **Thomas Pulloppillil and Jacob Auckal** is a combination of essays by various scholars providing as insight into the Boro religion, *Brahma* religion, spread of Christianity, marriage system of the Boros etc. The writers who have contributed are Kameshwar Brahma, R.N. Moshahary, Sebastian Ayiloo Kunnel, Promalata Devi etc. **Bodos (Kacharis) at a Glance** by **Srimati Bijaya Laxmi Brahma** (2002) throw light on the various aspects of the Boros in a very brief way.

Works like **Bidyasagar Narzary and Malabika Mitra's Journey Towards Enlightenment - Gurudev and the Bodo Society** (G.B.D. Publishers, Guwahati: Kolkata, 2004) and **Manik Kr. Brahma's Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma: His Life and Deeds** (N.L Publications, Kokrajhar, 2001) throw ample light on the birth and working of *Brahma Dharma* as a socio-religious movement initiated in the colonial period. Information can also be gathered particularly from Narzary and

Mitra's work on the working of *Mahila Samities* and their role in bringing awareness among women for social reformation.

In **Forgotten Heroes** (G.B.D Publishers, Kolkata:Guwahati, 2004), **Bidyasagar Narzary** has paid a homage to all Boro freedom fighters who are hitherto not given due recognition in the history of India's freedom struggle. Here the author has mentioned the participation of all the female Boro freedom fighters who withstood imprisonment and police atrocities. The importance of the work lies in the fact that it is the first to mention the contribution of Boro women in the national movement of India.

Bibar, first Boro magazine is of great value as it provides a deep insight into the social conditions of the Boro people in the colonial period. This quarterly magazine was written in Boro, Assamese and Bengali languages. It was first published in April 1924 by **Kokrajhar District Bodo Employees, Literary Society**. Satish Chandra Basumatary was the first editor. The work is basically a compilation of essays and poems, main contributors being Rupnath Brahma, Bishnucharan Basumatary etc. Details of Boro students' union *sanmilanies* are also available. The magazine was written and published with the aim to give Boro people a new orientation to transcend from their ignorance towards enlightenment and the path they advocated was through education. What was important is that *Bibar* even emphasised on girls' education to gain their goal of all round development. **Boroni Phisa O Ayen** (translated by Prahlad Kumar Brahma, Harishchandra Kachari and Madharam Kachari, Basumatary library, Dudhnoi, 2004), **Boroni Pandulipi** (G.B.D.'s, Guwahati, 2004) and **Samajik Sanbidhan** (Boko Anchalik Boro Jatiya Parishad, 1998-1999) provide a whole range of

information on social customs, religious rites, traditional instruments, weapons and even customary laws relating to offence and repentance as practiced in the traditional Boro community. Even a unit is devoted to *Stri Sankrantiya* (women related topics) in Samajik Sanbidhan. Here, basically it is mentioned what women are not supposed to do or attend various occasions under certain circumstances as determined by the society. The **Swrangsali** (souvenir) and **The Brahma**, the mouthpiece of the *Sodou Brahma Dharma Parichalana Samiti* provides ample information on various aspects of Boro culture. However, main thrust is on the aspects relating to religion of both *Bathou* and *Brahma Dharma*.

The North Eastern Social Research Centre at Kharghuli, The Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes established by the government at Guwahati and the Indian Council Of Historical Research (ICHR) too has contributed significantly towards the literature on the tribal women. In their yearly bulletin VOL-I: Number XII published in 1999, Kameshwar Brahma has written an article on the *Role and Status of the Bodo Women in their Society through the Ages* where he compiled all the information on Boro women's role in various spheres of life which are found scattered in his earlier works. The institute has also timely published works on various tribes of Assam including the Boros in the form of essays like *Selected Essays on Tribes and Castes of Assam* (2007), *Tribes of Assam P-I* (1987) and *Boro Sanskritit Dristipat* (2002). ICHR on the other hand has issued Lecture Series like Anil Boro's (unpublished) *The Brahma Movement And Socio-Religious Reform In Bodo Society In Early Twentieth Century*, 2008.

Much information on the various aspects of Boro community is also available in the various proceedings of North East India History Association (NEIHA), which

organises its session once a year. R.N Moshahary has contributed articles mostly related to Boro religion, society, festivals, their origin, development of Christianity among the Boros etc. Kameswar Brahma has also written an article: *A Common Picture of the Tribal Economy vis-a-vis Development Planning in Assam with special reference to the economic status of the Bodos* in NEIHA. In illustrating *Kherai Puja*, Moshahary has mentioned about woman's role in it. However, as a whole there is no essay devoted particularly to Boro women.

Thus, since the colonial times, detailed researches and works have been done on the Boro tribe. However, a survey of existing literature reveals that there has been a general neglect of an analysis of Boro women's subordination and dominance in the tribal society and economy. The significant contribution of women to forest-based livelihood and in biodiversity management and preservation has always been overlooked. Moreover, the Boro social structure is largely based on the patriarchal system but Boro society is often described as 'egalitarian and democratic' in most historical writings, where women are depicted to have greater freedom in respect to movement outside the home, choice of marriage, divorce, remarriage, and access to resources than women in the caste society and are said to be at par with the men in the tribal society. Aspects such as social responsibilities of women, their contribution to tribal economy, restrictions that they are entitled to, forms of gender differentiation and impact on women due to various forces in the colonial period have not received the kind of attention that they deserve. Hence, **the objectives of the study are to:**

- Make an in-depth analysis of the various contribution of Boro women to society and economy.

- Emphasize different aspects of women-nature bond based on indigenous knowledge and their skills of managing and conserving biodiversity.
- Discern the agencies of the colonial period which worked towards bringing about changes in the social and economic activities of Boro women, and how in the process, they emerged as an important agent of change.
- Focus on the process of alienation and marginalization which began in the colonial period owing to the influence of various socio-economic agencies.
- Critique the myth of an equal status of Boro men and women which evolved over time, by highlighting gender differentiation in the tribal society and economy of the colonial period.

So far the methodology is concerned, this research work is a qualitative analysis based on a gender sensitive approach and a substantial critique of patriarchy. The methodology and approach has been adopted keeping in view Boro women's involvement in production and reproduction, gender issues, and the mixed effects on men-women power relations by the forces of change in the colonial period, and are covered in the light of the objectives envisaged for the study. The study is based on Primary Data Collection and an analysis of Secondary sources. Primary data has been gathered from different Gazetteers, Census Reports, Annual Reports of Santal Mission of Northern Churches (SMNC) and North Eastern Lutheran Churches (NELC), *Pandulipis* (Boro customary laws) and through field-study and interview schedules. While conducting interviews and filling up the questionnaires, basic information about the respondents like name, parentage, education, practising faith and the like along with their signatures have also been taken. Field work of the present study included an equal number of

respondents practicing Bathou *Dharma*, Christianity and *Brahma Dharma* from different villages. The respondents belonged to the age group of 20-60 years. Besides women, men were also interviewed for an in-depth study. The study also involves analysis of oral tradition with a critical approach to interpret and re-examine the existing sources, based on internal and external criticism. The secondary data has been gathered from various books, ICHR Lecture Series, bulletins and journals published by the State at Guwahati, and Souvenirs and journals (*The Brahma*), of the *Sodou Brahma Dharma Parichalana Samiti* etc.

In an attempt to apply the Rights Based Approach (RBA) to the work it is found that the theory can be applied only in part to the present study. The RBA which was developed in the later part of the twentieth century, viewed gender inequality not necessarily in terms of its effects, but through the 'lens of basic human rights'. However, it may be noted that this approach is confined within the definition of 'human rights' as defined by the United Nations, which does not extend to areas such as private domain, religious practices etc. that fall outside this definition. Moreover, Boro women of the colonial period had minimized rights. At the same time it cannot be ruled out that there are certain aspects which can be studied within the framework of RBA. It can very effectively be used as a tool to understand the vulnerability of Boro women by identifying the forms and causes of gender differentiation that existed in the colonial Boro society of Assam. The socio-religious and economic agencies which affected the roles of women can be identified as duty-bearers, thereby, the accountability of duty-bearers of the period can be studied and how far their works and programs could bring in development for women or be helpful in upgrading their marginalized position.

The hypotheses of the study:

- Boro women of the colonial period played a significant role in society and economy despite the prevalence of gender differentiation.
- Women made significant contribution in the management and preservation of biodiversity.
- Colonial period was marked by three agencies viz. Christian Missionaries, Colonial Government and emergence of *Brahma Dharma*. Impacted by changes brought about by these agencies, women themselves became important agents of socio-economic change.
- The colonial period resulted in a process of alienation and marginalization of Boro women.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter i.e. *Introduction* gives an overall idea about the work. It deals with the geographical location of the selected area of undivided Goalpara along with definition of terms and the methodology with which the study has been carried out. It provides a general view on Boro society and economy of colonial Assam. The chapter also assesses the contribution made by women in various fields and the changes that were impacted on their traditional roles brought in the colonial period by various socio-economic forces. This chapter includes a survey of literature, objectives, hypotheses and methodology for the present study.

The second chapter entitled *Women in the Pre-colonial Era* focuses on the contribution of Boro women to production and reproduction. The chapter discusses the diverse contribution of Boro women by examining their multiple roles under three heads- domestic, social and economic spheres. The women-environment relationship and utilization of traditional knowledge in almost all domestic chores and social functions have been emphasised. Economic activities like managing cowshed and backyard poultry, fishing with traditional implements

made by women themselves, weaving and dyeing cloths with natural colours, rearing of cocoons etc. show that women derive most of their sustenance from natural resources. While discussing the social roles of women, prevalence of some matrilineal and matrilocal features in the patriarchal Boro tribal society has been highlighted, which project the important status enjoyed by women in the Boro tribal society. The chapter notes that although Boro women were largely responsible for reproduction, undertook domestic and social responsibilities, contributed to economic means of production and enjoyed predominance in certain traditional activities, yet they did not enjoy equal status with their male counterparts in the pre-colonial society.

The third chapter entitled *Socio-Economic Transition in the Colonial Period* shows the process of transition in the Boro society taking place in the colonial regime. It explores why and how the transition was initiated, women's reaction towards such a process and the consequence of these changes on the lives and roles of Boro women. The Christian Missionaries, the *Brahma Dharma* and the colonial Government have been identified as the socio-religious agencies that impacted Boro women. However, the chapter discusses the activities and effects of the works of Christian missionaries and *Brahma Dharma* while the changes brought by the colonial Government are discussed in the next chapter. The chapter begins with the missionary view about the Boro people and their perception of tribal customs and manners. The missionaries taught women about health and hygiene, opened up schools, appointed Boro men and women as pastors and Bible women in church, established medical missions, translated English works into Boro language and promoted Boro literature. The *Brahma Dharma* which on the other hand was a native agency considered that improvement in the condition of women

would contribute in the larger perspective of reforming the Boro tribal society. As such some its works directly attempted to focus on women's question and steps were taken as such for example the establishment of *Mahila Samities*, boost of commercial weaving for women, promotion of women education, equality of sexes etc. Despite the noble attempts of the agencies in ameliorating the condition of women, the activities of missionaries and the native agency initiated a process of alienating women from traditional social and economic roles making their position vulnerable. It focuses how the traditional economy was upset with the introduction of market economy by the British Government affecting the various roles of Boro women.

In the fourth chapter *Alienation, Marginalization and Women's Agency* the focus is on how women were alienated from their traditional socio-economic roles. Here the impact of colonial Government on Boro women has been emphasized. With the introduction of various reforms and administrative changes viz., land-holding record, Wasteland Rules, introduction of money economy, settlement of various immigrants demarcation and particularly its forest reforms deprived women of their control over land and forest. Consequently, the women-nature bond was also eroded which in turn affected the significant role that women played in biodiversity management and preservation. As such it alienated women from the means of production making them dependent on the men. The money economy on the other hand worsened their position since the fines under the customary law were to be paid in money which put women in a difficult position. At the same time one important positive impact of the socio-economic agencies on Boro women was that women became aware of their potentialities and consciously worked towards socio-economic transformation. Political consciousness was also seen in the contribution of distinguished Boro women who fought against the

British and participated in the freedom movement of India. Thus while the socio-economic agencies succeeded in bringing awareness among the women, they were also alienated from their privileged roles in the traditional society, indigenous wisdom and economic means of production which slowly tilted in favour of the male. Gender differentiation assumed a higher level, making the status of Boro women disadvantageous in comparison to the men.

The fifth chapter, *Conclusion* provides an over- all analysis of the preceding chapters and recapitulates the major findings of the study. It also highlights the prevalence of the myth of equality of men and women in the Boro tribal society. The study refutes this myth of gender equality by refuting the existence of matriarchal features and revealing the forms of gender differentiation between men and women that was practiced in the Boro tribal society and economy. Though women substantially contributed to the tribal life and culture yet their status was not at par with the men. Even the customary laws did not always conduce to the interest of women, baring a few cases. The system of sharing property, inheritance of heirlooms favoured men. However, the Boro society witnessed a process of transition in colonial period effected by various socio-economic forces. To some extent women became conscious about their capabilities, and even political awareness was noticeable among them. More importantly they became agent of socio-economic change. However, gender differentiation widened in the society and the policies of the colonial Government slowly jeopardized the economic position of women and affected women's relation with the environment.

To understand this process of transition, it is necessary to review women's position in Boro society and economy in the pre-colonial period, which will be discussed in the following chapter.