Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Problem

The present study is in the framework of public private dichotomy to focus the aspects of absence of gender neutrality as advocated by the feminists and on the basis of gender discrimination practiced in the present day society, leading to the development of Women's empowerment process. On the basis of this theme attempt is made to represent the changing aspects and role of Bodo women during the pre and post Bodoland Movement.

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The concept of public private binary indicates that 'private' is what goes on inside a family, and 'public' is what concerns with the society. But it is important to recognize that everything that is private is not necessarily left to the whims and fancies of individual families. Very often private options become the basis for evolving a public opinion and decision and thus the question of privacy is a relative issue within the broader framework of community. The practiced norms, values and preference of a society provide the backdrop in which privacy and private arena within the family are defined.
The Liberals view of the public private dichotomy is however marked by some conceptual slippage (Chandhoke, 1995). In some version, the division between public and private is the family, which is private, and everything else is public including the society. The family is private because access to it is restricted, and society is public because on principle it is accessible to all. In another version of liberalism, society is seen as private. Society, accordingly, is the sphere of right-bearing individual. These rights include right of privacy, which is not to be interfered with except on stipulated grounds. Therefore, the natural outcome of this version is, the society including the household is private. This has been made furthermore complicated by the liberals when they share the view that out of the individual pursuit of private interests, the common /public good can be achieved. Thus, if society is the sphere of private interest and needs, it is also the sphere where the public good can be realized. Thus, the liberal formulation reveals – whereas the household is always private, the status of society is indeterminate. It is public or private or perhaps both, depending on the problem that is sought to be highlighted (Chandhoke, 1995).

This public and private dichotomy in the society as argued by the liberals has been strongly criticized by the feminists. They are of the view that the relegation of the household to the private sphere has disempowered women. The feminists have powerfully demonstrated the blindness of the liberals in regard to the patriarchal ordering of the society. Indeed, they
have questioned the very distinction made between the public and the private. The household has been regarded as private because it is based on a qualitatively different set of values such as emotions, loyalties and unreflective affiliations in contrast to the rational, self-interested and egoistic public sphere. Criticizing this stance, the feminists make powerful argument that the identification of the household with the private and the identification of women with the household have brought the subordination of women. The feminist argument has focused upon three aspects of the dichotomy between the private and the public. Firstly, their argument is that the family is the microcosm of the society; it reproduces labor power; it provides demand for goods and services; reproduces the values of the society and transmits cultural traditions through socialization from generations to generations. Thus the family reflects the power relations of subordination and domination in society in the form of gender inequality. To consider this sphere as private and hence outside the ambit of social concern or public intervention is, in other words, to undermine an entire sphere, which is marked by oppression and domination. It should be within the circle of concerns for the entire community. Secondly, the feminists argue that, on the right of privacy, the power of the male head within the household, since historically it has been the male who has been the bearer of rights in the public sphere. Thirdly, when women have been formally enfranchised, domestic stereotypes have reinforced the exclusion of women from the public arena. The identification of female and the male has been done in two different ways – while the former is affective, unreflective domestic world, the later is rational and deliberative one. Even if the female is a participant in the public arena, only gender representation hampers her participation as a rational deliberative being. This
development has considerable implications for those women who have managed to gain entry into the public sphere.

In a democratically conceived public sphere, the non-participation or incomplete participation of an entire section of people indicates that the public sphere is restricted. Democracy, or rights, or empowerment in the public arena is of little value if entire section of the people continues to experience oppression on private arena. The domains of the public and private to the feminists are consequently not 'separate but equal'. The subordination of the women in the domestic world is reproduced in public universe. A woman who is subjugated in her private life to patriarchal structure of domination cannot by definition, participate in the democratically conceived public arena as a citizen with equal rights. Her dependent status within the family life is reflected in the exclusion from, or subordination within, the public domain.

Similarly a woman whose voice is not considered in the decision making process in her home, in whatever issue it may be, cannot be, in public dialogue considered as an equal. The principle of separate but equal is flawed, because it fails to see that a subject who is neither equal nor autonomous in the private sphere, cannot be equal or autonomous in the public sphere (ibid). The problem with liberalism and its public private dichotomy is that it does not consider the patriarchal ordering of society and the resultant powerlessness of women. It is a constraint in the power relations between the genders. Man is dominant in both spheres while woman is subordinated in both. Therefore, the feminist argument is that the doctrines of 'separate but equal', as advocated by the liberalists, obscure the patriarchal
reality of social structure of inequality and domination of women by man (Patmen, 1983). The feminist critiques are of the opinion that in the structuring of the modern society, gender oppression violates the rights to equality and justice and thereby makes it essential to reconsider the sanctity of the private domain.

The traditional thinking about the role and status of women in the society has been vehemently challenged by the social scientists in general and feminist activists/scholars in particular. The idea that public domain is for man and private domain is for women has been viewed seriously and is now becoming an area of scholarly discussion. This is more so in view of the rise of feminization movement during 1960-70, when women's empowerment became a new terminology being increasingly applied by the scholars of different branches of social science. Then what does empowerment mean?

To Andre Beteille, the current definition of empowerment is -“Empowerment is about social transformation. It is about radical social transformation; and it is about the people - ordinary, common people, rather than politicians, expert and other socially and culturally advanced persons, above all, it is about power, although the concept of power contained in it is generally left unspecified” (Beteille, 1999). The traditional patriarchal society has nurtured the idea that women are both physically and mentally not equal with man and hence their place should be within the private domain as against the public domain, which is meant for man. This gender-based role, on the one hand limits the role of women in the society and, on the other hand it goes against the democratic principle of rights and
equality. Therefore the concept of women’s empowerment has led to a serious discourse about the status of woman.

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In Indian context, empowerment stands for transformation of people, their life and status, which includes the basic needs, economic security, capacity building, skill formation, participation in the decision making process (in whatever levels it may be) and above all a dignified social existence. Empowerment, however, in no way can be explained in terms of attainment of political power only. Nor it can be considered on the basis of merit of gender. There are situations where numerous decisions can be taken and/or have to be taken at the family, caste, village or regional levels and for an effective decision at all such levels women should be adequately empowered. The enlistment of the status of the women rests on their empowerment, which comes through education, employment and more importantly by awareness. This stand has been followed in the context of the present thesis.

The advent of the British in India brought not only a new form of government, but also new knowledge, new information and new technology. The educated class of Indian people took issues of social discrimination against women with the assistance of British ruling elite and started social reformation in India. Social problems like child marriage, bride burning, restriction on widow-remarriage and other disabilities pertaining to the women in Indian society were addressed. During the first two decades after independence, the studies were
mainly focused on the middle class educated urban women who were taking up jobs and facing the conflicts brought in by their dual roles both within and outside the household.

During 1960-1975, under the supervision of Central Social Welfare Board, the Government tried to look into the women's issues like discrimination of wages and unemployment of women, health hazards and education. It took up the women's issue at three levels: the policy, the programmes and the implementation part. The policies of the Board were proposed to be carried out or implemented throughout successive Five Year Plan period, but neither the social scientists nor the policy makers of the state were serious enough about the increasing devaluation of the status of women, women's protest against the state or the declining sex ratio. However, the Government appointed the Committee on Status of Women in India to undertake a comprehensive examination of all the related issues about the rights and status of Indian women in the context of changing socio-economic condition of the country and even empowered the Committee to suggest remedial measures. As a result of this, from the 1970s onwards, a new awareness and sensitivity towards women's issues were witnessed in India.

During post 1975 period, women's issues have been seen on a different perspective in India. The findings of different Committees and Commissions appointed by the Government of India up to 1971, revealed facts about women's education, health, political participation etc. and by all standard it represents a shocking condition of Indian women after three decades of its independence. In the meantime, the year 1975 has been declared as the International Year of Women, which was subsequently extended for a decade.
Against this backdrop, research institute like Indian Council for Social Science Research dedicated research work pertaining to women related issue, especially policy-oriented studies and reexamination of social science theories. Emphasis was given to revive the debate on the women's questions, concentrating on the position of poor women in a developing economy like India. This period also can be considered important as from this time onwards systematic studies and commitment to actions were considered integral parts of women's studies.

With the emergence of women's issues in the areas of health, employment and increasing explosion of violence in the public and private sites, the optimistic expectations from development policy were negated. Further, the hope that development policy would lead to welfare of all was also lost. Issues of marginalisation of women and other weaker sections in the development process surfaced, and the development debate focused on the very nature of development and the structural contexts within which the development was taking place. Thus gender emerged both as a category and as a unit of analysis. Issue based studies like patriarchy in the family and in political relations as well as studies of the Women's Movement and challenges faced grappled the academic and activist concerns. Questions such as control over body, the process of consciousness building, identity formation and locating the strength of women in crisis became the important areas of research. Thus, during this period women were not only made visible but efforts was made for understanding the reality.
On empowerment front, during the late Eighties and Nineties, it was a period of challenges for both academics and activists. Along with the social happenings like ‘sati’ of ‘Roop Kanwar’ and case of maintenance on ‘Shah Bano’, the acceptance of globalization and a new economic world order dictating terms by International Economic Community has changed the thrust of economy, polity, education and culture. Accordingly, the structuring of the social institutions like family, caste and community identity, and status of women has also undergone changes. The changing status of women very often poses challenges to the age-old patriarchal values. The phenomenon of women’s illiteracy, subordination or sexuality has been articulated and women’s role in the decision-making system is considered important. During this period a crucial problem in Women’s Studies was of engendering mainstream disciplines. Disciplines like Economics, Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, History are to some extent opening up to incorporate discussions on gender, housework and power, but there is no wholehearted acceptance of all explorations based on studies from a gender perspective.

The Department of Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India released the “National Policy for Empowerment of Women” in 2001. Officially, the term ‘empowerment of women’ has been co-opted at all levels by the Govt. of India. Women’s issues under the fabric of Women’s Studies have been incorporated in higher education syllabus with an aim of studies and research on significant women’s problem. There has been a marked shift from the women’s issue of welfare to development. India’s ‘SHRAMSHAKTI’ report also recommended that in
"planning and decision making / implementing bodies, women’s participation should not be in terms of token representation but in proportion to their numbers”. However, in spite of all these recommendations, the women are still suffering from all sorts of social tyranny under which Mr. Justice Krishna Iyer put it as, ‘if Law’s promises were facts of life’ India would be a women’s paradise’. It is decidedly not so, even under the much talked about “National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001”.

Thus, empowerment of women in India is true only on theoretical perspective. More than six decades of adaptation of a democratic constitution in India, the ground reality represents a different picture altogether. The enactment of 73rd amendment of the constitution is a glaring example of it.

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With regard to the Bodos, they are the most prominent tribal community in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. They have the tradition of patriarchy but still the women have a very respectable position in the family (Boro, 2004). Apart from their normal household works, women are very actively engaged in agricultural and allied activities of the family. They constitute a strong workforce in the family. In addition to the normal works of a housewife like caring and rearing of babies and preparing food for the family, they go to the paddy field, take care of the kitchen garden, maintain the household livestock like cattle, pigs, poultry, goats etc., meet the family requirements of garments from their
handloom and, above all, it is they who are maintaining the ethnic identity in the traditional community life style.

History of participation by the Bodos in various movements like Moamaria rebellion against the Ahom kings, the Sarania Movement, the Brahma Movement or the Movement of Christian Missionaries in ancient Assam gives us an understanding of the present day participation in the Bodoland Movement which took place during 1987-1993. But the recent Bodoland movement has another significance. While its objective was to achieve a specific political goal in the design of a homeland for the Bodos, towards realizing this, it was able to create a social awakening amongst the people. This sense of social awareness virtually brought in a different socio-economic and socio-political condition for the Bodos, which was not seen prior to the Bodoland movement. With the initiation of an agenda for separate homeland, tremendous social resurgence has been observed amongst the community members, including the women. In this process, in fact, women have acquired a new role without disturbing their traditional family activities and have come out of the private domain to actively participate in the public domain, which was earlier not seen with them.

1.2 Objectives of the study

1. To reflect the women's empowerment process because of the existing ideas of public private dichotomy based on gender in the society.
2. To understand social resurgence amongst the women folk during the pre and post Bodoland Movement period as a process women's empowerment.

3. To project the changing role of the Bodo women pertaining to their economic, educational and socio-political life between the pre and post Bodoland movement as a process of empowerment.

1.3 Hypothesis

With the above noted objectives in mind, certain hypothesis and assumptions have been made and tested during the course of the study. For this purpose, similar studies done by different scholars have been taken into account. The hypotheses are:

1. The gap between the public and private arena based on the consideration of gender is decreasing and therefore involvement of women in public domain will increase.

2. The Bodoland Movement is a causative factor towards social resurgence and increase in awareness among the Bodo women.

3. Religion is playing a significant role in creating social awareness and development.
1.4 Scope of the study

This study tries to identify the public private dichotomy leading to women’s empowerment process through the study of Bodo women. To examine the changing role and status of women in that society, villages within and outside the BTAD have been covered under this study. The impact of the Bodoland Movement on Bodo women and the relevant issues of their empowerment will be studied keeping in mind the period before the movement from 1985 till after the movement up to 2005.

1.5 Significance of the study

Firstly, this study is significant as it deals with public private dichotomy in the context of patriarchal social structure, the feminists view on public private distinction in terms of the role played by women, and the special attention shown by the social scientists towards the process of empowerment of women under this framework. Secondly, this study also bears significance as it tries to bring out the issue of women’s empowerment pertaining to a predominant tribal community in Assam, the Bodos, within the specific time frame of pre and post Bodoland movement. Moreover, the significance of the study lay with the fact that, while discussing women’s empowerment, it has covered women’s socio-economic life, educational status achieved along with their participation in decision-making process. Thirdly, this work is significant because, no such study about women’s empowerment among the Bodos have been conducted so far.
1.6 Area of the study

Bodos are the most significant ethnic group in the Brahmaputra valley. They are found in scattered pockets of Kamrup, Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of Assam (Boro, 2001). But population concentration is not same in all the districts. In the north Kamrup area, dense population is found in the northern part of the Rangia Sub-Division of the present Kamrup (rural) district. These areas are now under the newly constituted Bagsa district of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD).

Seven Bodo villages have been selected for the purpose of this study. These are Kekohati, Bhatkuchi, Deulkuchi, Dholkuchi, Khundikar, Jhargaon and Patkijuli within the North Kamrup area. Out of the selected villages, two are from outside the BTAD - Kekohati and Bhatkuchi. These two villages are surrounded by non-Bodo villages and have no territorial linkage with the BTAD but in the vicinity of it (BTAD). Another three villages Deulkuchi, Dholkuchi and Khundikar are within the BTAD, but at its borderline and very close to the non-Bodo settlement. Finally, other two villages - Jhargaon and Patkijuli are well within the BTAD and surrounded by different Bodo villages only. Therefore, these three sets of villages have different experiences because of the variations of geo-political feature. In case of the two villages of Jhargaon and Patkijuli, they have a distinct feature in the strong influence of religious ethics and practices upon the villagers. In case of Jhargaon it is the Brahma cult while in Patkijuli, the stronghold of Christianity is quite prominent. The
reason of selecting these two villages having different religious practices is to find out the role played by religion on the changing status of women.

1.7 Methodology

This study is basically on women's empowerment as a result of public private dichotomy under the framework of social relationship. Therefore, at the initial stage, library work on public private dichotomy in the context of gender-based role practiced in the society has been done to formulate the theoretical framework. Different published materials on feminism and gender study have been studied for presentation of women's empowerment movement in a chronological order. Thereafter, for articulation of facts about the Bodos, some literatures on ethnographic cultural history have been consulted. To highlight the resurgence process in the Bodo society, especially amongst the womenfolk, in addition to the reading materials, extensive fieldwork has been done throughout the identified areas considered for the present study. The study is based on field survey method. During survey, selective sampling technique had been adopted. For the purpose of data collection, formulated scheduled had been used amongst the respondent women to extract the required information from them. Relevant secondary sources were also taped for this purpose. As a part of field survey, at times, a few prominent figures, both male and female, have been personally interviewed to gather pertinent information. They are mainly educationists, social workers, political leaders, entrepreneurs, senior government/non-government officials and activists. At times, statistical documents maintained in different government offices and schools that are relevant to the study, have also been scanned.
Initially, to find out the feasibility of the topic, two villages have been surveyed thoroughly and primary samples are drawn by means of house-to-house visit. Mainly data regarding family set-up, economic status of the family, literacy rate, engagement of women folk – in the domestic front as well as in outside activities if any, involvement of the women in community life for social progress etc. are recorded. Special care is taken to explore maximum possible information about women related issues. The whole exercise took almost two months and the response was very encouraging. Only problem was that the women were a bit shy to divulge their own affairs and sometimes get suspicious mainly due to their illiteracy and conservative nature. On the whole, the experiences gathered during this initial field survey encouraged the researcher to go ahead with the project in mind.

Before proceeding further, written literature available on different aspects of the community life of the Bodos were studied. A few Bodo scholars, social activists, sociologists and folklorists and historians were approached for discussion on the issue. Relevant facts and figures were drawn from different government and non-government agencies to construct a demographic profile of the Bodo population of the study area. At times, prominent non-Bodo resident from these areas had also been approached.

In the next phase, after selecting the seven villages as mentioned above, the actual fieldwork for the present work started. A basic information schedule was prepared to collect the relevant data from individual household and different institutions and organizations like schools or self help groups or women’s forum functioning in the
concerned areas. It is needless to mention here that this fieldwork was very much time consuming. The data collection process was not easy for different reasons. Firstly, due to communication bottleneck, it was difficult to meet the people easily. Secondly, although the Bodos are very much close to the Assamese life style, they, particularly the woman folk, still hesitate to meet a non-Bodo man freely to talk about their family life. Sometimes language also became a barrier. Thirdly, without an introduction by a male member from the family or neighborhoods, women were not readily agreeable to discuss their personal socio-economic condition. Fourthly, Bodo women are very busy with their day-to-day works that they have hardly free time to spare. At times, they mistook the researcher as Government official from the Community Development Block office and simply try to avoid. During the course of these visits one important aspect came to the notice that they are not very willing to disclose about their financial condition and are shy about their educational level and issues like changing trend in marriage system, family relationship etc. As time went by and rapport established, information began to be shared easily. For collection of data, although well-structured schedule was there, the most effective device appeared to be the informal chat with the women. It is worth mentioning that Bodo people are very simple and straightforward. Therefore, they must be convinced about the honesty and sincerity on the part of the investigator about his work while collecting information from them.

Data collection was a long process. The pilot study conducted to examine the feasibility of the present work was confined to two villages only, which took almost two months. This was done during November-December, 2003. During the course of the pilot study informal
interview schedule was used to gather the information. This exercise proved very helpful while taking up the field survey work for the present study. The fieldwork for the present study was started in September 2004. A theoretical framework was constructed and the areas relevant for the purpose of data collection were finalized. From September 2004 to April 2005, the first phase of field survey was completed in all the seven villages. During this period mainly demographic profile of all the villages was created. The population statistics up to the year 2005 was collected through house-to-house survey. In this process, a close contact was established with the villagers. Thereafter, in the second phase, which started from the month of October 2005, till the end of March 2006, the information about the women's economic activities, educational status, political participation, social awareness level etc. were collected. In this phase, along with individual contact with the respondent women, visits to different academic institutions necessitated for collecting relevant information. In between, the collected information was analyzed keeping in mind the objectives of the study. At times, library works were also done to clarify certain theoretical concepts relevant to the research problem. Based on the concept acquired through library works, the third phase of field survey was done by the end of December 2006 till April-May, 2007. During this phase, most of the time was devoted to have on the spot study about the working of Self Help Groups (SHGs) and collection of relevant information from different villages. The collected data were analyzed from time to time as a result of which some new information became necessary to be collected further from the study area. Field survey was finally completed during November-December, 2007. During the last phase, different persons from the community were interviewed within the study area, which includes social activists, political leaders, government servants and student
leaders. During different phases of field survey, the village headman (Gaonburah) in all the villages played a key role. At times, some Bodo college students also helped in communicating with the womenfolk.

In addition to the collection of information at individual level, sometimes focused group discussions were also organized with women in different villages. It was a very wonderful experience where women actively participated and the outcome was, the free flow of information. For example, issues on family health care and hygiene and women's awareness towards reproductive health and childcare were most significant.

To collect certain information pertaining to the issues of women's empowerment amongst the Bodo and participation of women in the Bodoland Movement, prominent women leaders and social activists were interviewed at Kokrajhar. Moreover, the BTC secretariat was also visited to gather information related to BTAD. Some female employees working in the Railway Divisional Office and BSNL office at Rangia were also approached to know their views.

In addition, certain statistical data were collected from the different government/school offices to assess the participation of Bodo children in education.
1.8 Presentation of Materials

Chapter I - Introduction. This chapter gives an idea about the problem under the study, the conceptual framework, objectives, scope, significance, and location of study area and methodology of the study. It also gives the review of the existing literature.

Chapter II - Introducing the Bodos. The chapter gives a brief description of the Bodo community, their traditional life style with special emphasis on the role and status of women. A note on the recent Bodoland Movement and women's involvement in it has also been incorporated here.

Chapter III - The village profile. This chapter presents the geo-political scenario of the seven villages undertaken for study for the present research work.

Chapter IV to Chapter VII-- These four chapters discuss about Bodo women and their involvement and status achieved in education, in economy, their political participation and the social awareness level respectively. It gives an analysis supported by field data on all the above-mentioned areas.

Chapter VIII - It is the concluding chapter, which draws conclusion on the findings of the study.
In classical western political tradition from the time of Aristotle the Public realm of the polis, state or republic is the site for man where people consent to laws that govern personal and social conduct. According to Aristotle, “man is by nature an animal to live in a polis” (Barker, 1962). The family remains in the private realm. The family being the primary unit of the society forms the training ground of conduct, nature and morality. While the public realm has been the domain of male subject, the private belongs to the wife or mother. Man also functions as husband or father within the family but does not take these roles into the public life. This school of thinking embodies those qualities with man which are not found with women and hence they are ‘naturally’ unfit for public life. For Aristotle, the ‘citizens’ men are the “integral part” of the polis while women, like children or slaves are the “necessary conditions” (Barker, 1962). This separation of public private dichotomy has a moral impact also when Aristotle mentioned, “the polis is the highest good, the final and perfect association” The particular position of women in the household enables them to share in the goodness but not to attain or acquire it. The separation of the public as political and private as apolitical with the greater public association being in the polis and the lesser private association being in the family resonates the works of western scholars such as Hegel, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Kant, Locke and Hume. Hegel granted divine laws to the women while human law belongs to the man or the state.

Thus, the public private relationship bears a close associational meaning and linked to the basic notion of male and female. But its contents and implication varies with the exigencies
of every individual society. This situation has demanded a redefining of the public private concept under the framework of gender equality. There is no clear-cut origin of public private dichotomy. As Germaine Greer suggests that “while the male-hunter-gatherer strolled along burdened with no more than his spear and a throwing stick, his female mate trudged along after him carrying their infant, their shelter, their food supplies and her digging stick” (Boiling, 1996). It implies that from the moment of human interaction and language, and its implicit category making of social divisions, women has always been associated with the private and the men with public. Since the Industrial Revolution in late 19th century and early 20th century, men have been defined as moneymaking workers and women as child bearing emotional support for men (Boyd 1997). In this traditional model “the ability of the unencumbered individual (man) to participate in the public sphere of work and politics assumes that, someone, usually a woman, preparing his food, cleaning his house and raising the next generation of laborers through her reproductive labor”(Boyd, 1997). This public private dichotomy has been created over centuries to spatially separate men and women’s world as part of the world and home syndrome. It has been a part and parcel of patriarchy as a state of mind and system of control. The modern phase of public private dichotomy is arguing for “men’s inalienable rights” and “men’s natural rights” which waylaid women within the invisible home-based milieu (Jamil, 2000). This structural flaw was addressed by neutralizing “gender”, in both the UN Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948, where the principle of equal rights of man and woman are center stage, but without adequately addressing how women will be released from their ‘private’ marginalized position in society and family. This has necessitated the refining of existing division of public private dichotomy.
The dichotomy between the public and private is central to almost all feminist literature and political struggle. Of course, some feminists treat this dichotomy as universal, trans-historical and trans-cultural feature of human existence. “In course of history, women’s voices have been silenced in public arena and this was mainly linked with mainly three things: their sexuality, their natality and their body” (Pateman, 1983). However, the first wave feminists have the fight for women’s suffrage. Women have been using politics to enter to the public realm, thus challenging the division between public man and private women. The ultimate goal is to create equality between both the sexes, both in the public and the private sphere. But this process again, blurred the gender space of man and woman because of the linkage between public private and man women. The deconstruction of public private dichotomy has several implications. It has politicized women’s voice that disrupted the unity of women. Secondly the concerns of private life are now exposed to the public that has allowed even public and political influence in private life particularly in the form of legislation, thirdly threatens the existence of individuality of woman as woman and finally the sanctity of private life. Therefore, looking at different aspects, there is a need of reconstructing gender equality within the public and private space. Our goal is to maintain gender equality by preserving the public private divide and the integrity and individuality of man and woman. Because, the reality is that the public and the private are not in opposition to one another, but are in reciprocal connection with one another.

The linkage of public private dichotomy with political and apolitical division closes women into an area of apolitical private and thereby overlooking the role of women in politics. To
Elshtain, in politics, women's concerns and demands are regarded as only reflection of familial commitment rather than genuine political stance and these "women's issues" are easily bypassed by the male dominated political system, instead of considering it as a balancing proposition for a stabilized public private life of everyone (Elshtain, 1981).

Feminist research and gender study fundamentally challenged the binary of public private distinction. While the first wave feminism demanded for the right of women's suffrage, the second wave feminism attempted to break down the gendered division between the public sphere for man and private for women. Feminist scholars have pointed out and documented that gender acts as a lens or filter through which people view, understand and analyze the world and thus the absence and presence of men and women in different field of society is a very important aspect of consideration, be it political science or as politics itself (Menon, 1999).

The term 'gender' is typically distinguished in social sciences from 'sex'. Sex refers simply biological bases of distinguishing male and female whereas gender refers to the characteristics and behavior prescribed for a particular sex by the society and learned through socialization. (Naila, 1995). Thus gender is socially constructed every individual is actively involved in maintenance of gender roles. But at the same time, the behavior and characteristics associated with gender is not universal and timeless. It varies from society to society and from time to time depending upon the context. Every culture has a set of characteristics and behaviors that is deems appropriate for the two sexes. This binary of gender is directly opposite but mutually exclusive. Moreover, the characteristics associated
with men and masculinity is more highly valued than that are associated with women and femininity, a dominant and privileged one. Peterson and Runyan have opined that "the social construction of gender is actually a system of power that not only divides men and women as masculine and feminine but typically places men and masculinity above women and femininity" (Peterson and Runyan, 1992). The dichotomy resulted in the superiority of man and masculinity. Reason, order, culture and action are all associated with men and masculinity. This privileged embodiment of masculinity or the masculine traits thus produce and reinforce gender inequality. This peculiar compartmentalization of gender has affected the understanding of the world including views and studies of politics. Even most of the social and political scientists do not question the dualism of male female as a system of unequal power blocks.

Fundamentally, the feminist scholars have challenged the conceptual distinction that liberals make between the public sphere in which the state can legitimately intervene and the private sphere where individuals can be left free from state interference. They have questioned the validity of the public-private dichotomy and this is more vibrant in politics as politics is a field of study and practice specifically defined by public-private split (Chaudhuri et al., 1985). They have challenged the separation of public-private because of the numerous flaws in the distinction and drew the attention to the ways in which the public-private spheres are interrelated and structured by liberal patriarchy. They have analyzed how women's role as child bearing and rearing and other domestic responsibilities marginalized in the public sphere, how economic dependency has enabled men to dominate women in all ways and finally settles them at home to attend man's domestic, emotional
and material needs. To Barker, Gillian and Nicholson thus, the private is constructed by the public through legislation on marriage, sexuality and politics of the welfare state, but also that this construction both presupposes and reinforces the subordinate status of women and stereotypical views of their roles and responsibilities. (Barker 1978, Gilligan 1986, Nicholson 1986)

Radical feminists extended the challenge to the liberal separation of the public and private sphere. Radical feminists claimed that the family is a central part of society’s power structure and the chief institution of patriarchy (Hartsock, 1984). Within the family women are exploited domestically, manipulated emotionally, abused sexually. It is here that women are exposed to the physical violence. It is here where early socialization takes place, where gender identities are formed and reproduced, where sex role is learnt and internalized. Within the family the unequal distribution of domestic work, childcare, prestige and self-esteem, leisure time, consumption, emotions and economic distribution and finally the coercive authority of man over woman is reflected. These are not private or individual matter but portrayal of male authority and power and clear indication of a relation based upon dominance and submission.

Feminist then challenged the assumption of traditional political theorists that the families, domestic and personal life, were separate from social and political life. They claimed that this distinction enabled political theorists to neglect injustices in the private sphere and therefore to ignore a major part of inequalities of gender (Nicholson, 1986).
Feminists argue that the liberal view of human nature is based on a masculinity construction of self which sees each individual as separate and opposed to others. The concepts and ideas it gives rise to are not gender neutral, but reflect male norms and values. They do not reflect women's 'different voice'. It simply fails to include the distinctive women's experiences and role, norms and values in the public sphere (Gilligan, 1982, 1983. Held, 1984. Noddings, 1984).

The arguments presented above have affects on the ways of thinking about politics. Issues that mainstream theory considered non-political such as body, the family, reproduction, sexuality and inter-personal relationship should have been included in the study of politics that is in public domain. Even this also demands a critical re-examination of the original distinction, the concept that is already understood as areas of public domain such as power, liberty, equality, autonomy and rights. These should have been extended from the world of public life to the private life. At the same time, traditionally associated concepts with private sphere should have a conceptual change and redefine it as to what the private sphere should be. This situation has so arises as the different notions of public life like liberty, equality, rights etc. are applied to private sphere, domestic and personal relationship as well. (Hirschmann, 1992).

The feminist are also critical about the public private dichotomy while they put their views that this dichotomy is the outcome of male ways of thinking and the values associated with it and are not gender neutral. If care, cooperation and relationships are the central importance of life and every individual is striving to satisfy his own interests and
objectives, there must be a social life based on cooperation and interdependence. This has made the public and private sphere inseparable (Young, 1990). The private cannot be opposed to public. Drawing on women’s experiences of care taking, nurturing, sensitivity etc. feminists have attempted to reconstruct the already understood concepts and their meaning. The relationships, practices and values associated with women’s experiences are a model for relationship in the public world. Thus the private sphere is linked with the public sphere (Mansbridge 1983; Hirschmann 1992).

Despite these feminists’ contributions, most of the mainstream thinking in social sciences including politics uses this public private distinction neglecting the issues of gender and continues the separate sphere tradition. The ‘mainstream’ has become ‘male stream’. The above discussion on public private dichotomy has clearly indicated the absence of gender neutrality in modern state mechanism.

Lack of gender neutrality in the discourse of social sciences is the root cause of the development of the idea of women’s empowerment. Empowerment issues have been highlighted from different angles at different point of time and it varies with the prevailing situation of the state concerned. Scholars and activists in third world countries where poverty, illiteracy, social prejudice etc. are at large and patriarchal domination is the accepted social norms are engaged in mobilizing women’s issue through empowerment movement. Efforts have been made to provide the existing avenues to the women that are already allotted to them by the state machinery. Moreover, backward, downtrodden women
folk are made aware about their rights and privileges. Apart from the theoretical literature numbers of case studies have been conducted to highlight the women's issues.

In Indian perspective, women's issues were not adequately dealt with in post independence period (Choudhury, 1995). The International developments influenced the movement in India. (Agnihotri, and Mazumdar, 1995). According to Mary E. Jhon since 1970 the women's empowerment movement in India frames significance when the unrewarded labor of the mass of non-middle class women was written into national policy. (John, 1996.) Since 70s empowerment process amongst got its momentum in India. The national govt. as a policy decision introduced different programmes for creating women's awareness. A good number of social scientists have contributed towards locating the different women's problems with ways and means for its redressal. Well-documented field studies have also been conducted in different areas to establish the authenticity of the varied problems of economic, political, social and so on.

So far the Bodos in Assam, a most distinct tribal community of N.E. India, not much published work has been done particularly in terms of empowerment of women. Very limited works have been done on the cultural aspect of this tribal community like the socio-religious institutions, the folk literature etc. One recent work by Sucheta Sen Chaudhuri (2004) has presented the Bodo women's participation in the homeland movement of the Bodos only. Therefore, the present work is considered significant.