CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Women constitute about half of our total population and play specific and vital role either visible or invisible in society. In India as in many other countries of the world, women are regarded inferior to men. Roy (2010:101) stated that, “Almost in all societies, inequalities of women and men are part and parcel of an accepted male dominated culture and women are subjugated in all aspects of life till now”. In spite of her contribution in every fields of life way women enjoy very little or no freedom in her life. She is deprived of spending household income freely, her movement is restricted and she enjoys little or no freedom of taking important decisions. A woman rarely can choose her life partner, her marriage is controlled by others and her freedom of getting education, selecting life partner, and freedom of choosing occupation etc is also controlled by others. It is found that majority of women in rural India live under subjugation for whole life. According to Ashraf (1994:2), “Women’s status has been held to be lower to her male counterparts. A woman has no identity of her own. She receives her identity through the relationship to a man.” In Assamese there is a proverb, “Lao jimanei danger nahaok sadai patar tal”, meaning, a pumpkin, whatever big it may be, it always remains under the leaves. It signifies the poor status of women in relation to men. In India women are the unprivileged section of society. Her involvement in various sphere of life never get recognition. Even
women doing as wage labourer, do not get equal wage as man. In the history of the world very few women are holding significant role in politics, but such women are exceptions and it is not the rule. In Women and Politics Worldwide, Nelson and Choudhury(2000) maintain that a study had been carried out in 43 countries on women’s political engagement, which reveals the fact that women everywhere have a secondary political status. In India the Hindus worship many goddesses, but it has no any impact on the position of women in society. Relating to gender injustice in the patriarchal society of India, Singh(2008:1) stated, “Women in general, are placed in a very disadvantageous position; women are treated as third class citizen and remain subservient to the social, economic and political order ------”.

In the 1970s the United Nations focused world attention on the status of women. Member countries were asked to appoint committees that could gather statistics and produce report on the topic. As India and other countries set up commission to study the status of women the UN declared 1975 International Women’s year and 1975 – 85 women’s decade (Forbes, 2007: 1-2)

In India prior to Independence there was no dearth of research on women’s issues. The first decades of Independence were dominated by studies on middle class, educated, urban women who were taking jobs and facing the conflicts brought on by their dual roles (Desai and Thakkar, 2001: xi). During 1960 – 1973, some of the Commissions appointed by Government exposed the discrimination in wages, unemployment of women and health hazards (ibid, xii). After UN’s declaration 1975 as Women’s year and the directives to gather information on women issues the premier research organisation of India, “the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) decided to support research on women – specifically policy-oriented studies, re-examination of social science theories-and to revive the debate on the women question, concentrating on the position of poor
women in a developing economy (ibid, xii). Further, though in late 70s academic studies were started on women issues, it was only in 1986 University Grand Commission (UGC) established centres for research in few Universities on Women Study (ibid, xi). In the above perspectives the researcher decided to study the status of women in two tribal communities of opposite social system of North East belonging to same area.

1.2 The Present Study

In the present study an attempt has been made to have a holistic analysis of the status of women in a patrilineal and a matrilineal tribal society. The Boros, a patrilineal community and the Garos, a matrilineal community of North East India are selected as a subject for studying the status of women in the said societies. The area of the project is Kamrup district, Assam. The study has been conducted in two villages of Kamrup district, namely, the Bhogdabari and the Singpara. Its aim is purely academic and it has been conducted from anthropological point of view.

In the study the researcher has tried to find out the position of women in both the societies, in domestic area, in economic activities, in educational world, in marital life and in inheritance of property.

For assessing the status of women, a number of criteria are adopted; such as women’s right of decision making, right on income, right on property, right of choosing life partner and right on education. In this project the terms ‘status’ and ‘women’ are used with certain limitations.
1.3 Justification

The North East region of India contains a diverse population of Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist groups. Ethnically they belong to different tribal and non-tribal communities. Though patrilineae is found everywhere in the world matrilineae is rare. Eventually, the North East region embraces both patriarchal and matriarchal communities belonging to tribal group of similar ethnic features. There is a conventional idea regarding the status of women that in a patriarchal society the position of women is low and depressed, whereas in a matriarchal society they enjoy high status (Majumder and Madan, 2001:123). The justification behind the present work is to examine this conventional notion, weather it is true or false.

1.4 Objectives of the study

This research endeavour has the following objectives:

(a) To explore the status of women in the society if it is equal or lower to men.
(b) To find out the aspect of cooperation between husband and wife in domestic chores, caring and rearing of children.
(c) To search women’s freedom to earn and spend money without the permission of husband or other members of the household.
(d) To investigate women’s freedom of movement.
(e) To examine women’s participation in decision making and freedom of taking independent decision.
(f) To examine women’s freedom of choosing life partner.
(g) To examine women’s facilities regarding education.
(h) To examine the system of inheritance of parental property.
(i) To examine the present marriage system.
(j) To find out prevalence of husband’s assault.

The study will be conducted towards the above mentioned objectives. The differences and similarities between the Boro and the Garo communities will be shown at the end.

1.5 Hypotheses

The researcher will try to verify the following hypotheses:

A. Boro women’s status is lower in the family as the males are more dominant in 
   patrilineal society.
B. Though the status of women is considered as to be lower in the patrilineal society 
   they have the right to express their views and to earn and spend money within 
   domestic spheres.
C. Women are not free to take decision independently in both the societies.
D. Women’s status is higher in matrilineal society as they inherit parental property.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The researcher has certain constraints in conducting the entire project. In Kamrup 
district there are several inhabitancies of the Boro and the Garo population. But for the 
said project it is not possible to undertake study in all the villages of Boro and Garo 
inhabitancy. It is due to limitation of time prescribed for the work. So the study has been
conducted primarily in two selected villages, namely Bhogdabari, a Boro concentrated village and Singpara, a Garo populated village. However in collecting opinions on different matters, the investigator had to visit adjoining villages on a very few occasions.

Moreover, the status of women is a vast subject of study which can be studied in different areas of life. But for a researcher, it is not possible to cover all the aspects and areas, thus the objectives of the study have been concentrated to some particular areas of life.

1.7 The Terms

(a) Status

The term ‘status’ is sometimes deceptive. In sociological literature it is often used as synonymous for ‘role’ (Majumder & Madan, 2001:121). They used the term ‘status’ in their book An Introduction to Social Anthropology to such roles as being prestige to the persons who performs them (ibid). Oxford Dictionary defined status as “person’s social, legal and professional position or rank in relation to others” (Dictionary, 1989: 1254).

Linton (1936) has defined status as “a collection of rights and duties”. According to Mair (1966:9), status means a person’s position relatively to that of others with who he is in social relationships. ...................................................... One person may have many statuses. He can also be said to have a total status, which is relatively high or low in relation to other members of his society. Status may be ascribed or achieved. For every status there is an appropriate role. The rules defining the roles are called ‘role expectations’ (ibid.10).
According to Lowie (1920), the actual treatment given to women, their legal status and opportunity provided to them for social participation and extent of work in a particular society, all are the factors and determiners that determine each in a specific sense and manner, the status of women in a society. All these determinants may not be found to co-exist anywhere and are independent of each other (Majumder & Madan (1976: 141-142).

However, in this project the term ‘status’ is considered as defined by Mair (1966:9) i.e. “Status means a person’s position relatively to that of others with whom he is in social relationship”. So it is intended to highlight the position of women in relation to her male counterpart.

(b) Women

In the present project the term ‘women’ is meant to adult or matured females. The female, who get married, and the female, who attained the age of 18 years, are considered as matured female or women. The perception of society was verified in the field where the people accepted the rule of maturity of a girl as declared by Government of India. The term ‘men’ is also used to indicate the married males only.
1.8 Review of Literature

In recent time ‘Studies on Women’ is a great attraction for social scientists and researchers. A number of studies have been made by various professionals on various aspects of Women’s Status.

About status of women, Lowie (1920) in his book *Primitive Society* described that, the high status of women is an indicator of cultural development.

In his book *The Study of Man*, Linton (1936) had forwarded the concept of status. In his word “The term *status* like the term *culture*, has come to be used with a double significance. A status, in the abstract, is a position in a particular pattern”.

The statement of Lowie on status of women had been contradicted by Pritchard (1965), who said that the ethnographic materials don’t support him for, in most of the societies of the world, position of women were lesser than that of men.

Majumder, an eminent anthropologist of North East, spend long time among the Garos of Garo Hills district, Meghalaya and contributed an account of the Garo peoples i.e. *The Garos*. In his book, Majumder (1966) framed the total picture of traditional Garo people in their own background. His special attention to women of Garo society can be observed from the chapter ‘women in matriarchal society’.

After studying the status of rural women of India in some selected villages of Bangalore district of Karnataka, Khan and Aysha (1982) had published a book *The status of Rural Women of India*. The topic covered not only the different religious groups but also the various caste groups. The study was done to assess the effect of different Government schemes in improving the status of rural women of India.
Agrawal (1986) undertook a study entitled *A study of the Impact of Education on Social and Cultural Modernization of Hindu and Muslim Women*, where she had examined the influence of education in modernizing the social and cultural values of Hindu and Muslim women. The study also tried to find out the role played by religion in influencing the modernization process of those women.

Gupta (1987) had studied the *Social Status of Hindu women in Northern India (1206-1707)*. In her book Gupta had given a detailed authentic of the various facets of social status of Hindu women in Medieval India especially the Northern India.

Studies on women of N.E. India are basically oriented to tribal society. Bhuyan’s (1989) *The Tribal Women* may be referred to as one of the first work to compile individual research works of different scholars, on tribal women of N. E. India. The book dealt at length about the status of Karbi and Dimasa women.

Kakati (1989), in her research project *Socio Economic Status of Educated Working Women of Kamrup District* revealed the rights and privileges enjoyed by the educated working women and the stresses and strain they have to undertake in maintaining their two roles (home and job) along with the impact of their employment upon the society.

In *Women Studies in School Education: A New Perspective*, Kulshreshtha (1989) had given an account on women studies in Indian context. In the book the author has given a quick review on the global picture of women’s status where she has given an account of the condition of women of some developed, developing and underdeveloped countries. The author also discussed about the women of SAARC countries in one chapter. In the book the author put her discussion in view of the objectives to analyse how far women’s studies can be integrated with other traditional disciplines at school level of the country.
To know about the position of women outside the nation the researcher went through the book *Women of Africa* which is a research oriented result of Sharma (1989). Sharma in her work examines the problem of the status and position of South African women which caused due to intervention of the United Nations in historical perspective. The black women of South Africa often suffered due to legally sanctioned racist system prevailed in South Africa. Sharma also examined the role of black women in different activities including trade unions and highlighted their struggle in improving the position and status for themselves.

The *Status of women in Islam* was studied by Khan (1990). In his study he examined three important issues, the law of evidence and its effect on women and family life. The conclusion he arrives at was that Islam has given women a worth and dignity equal to man’s.

The *Status of Women in Assam*, edited by Barua (1992), is a compendium of seventeen papers from different scholars based on empirical studies on changing dimensions of non-tribal Assamese women, which includes Assamese women belonging to two major religious groups, viz. Hindu and Muslim, and rural tea garden communities. Similarly, the *Women of Assam* edited by Devi (1992) deals with several aspects of the Assamese women with a distinct educational zeal.

Chakravarty (1993), in his paper “Customary Laws and Status of Tribal Women in Tripura”, did a brief survey on some customary laws relating to the tribal women of Tripura. From study he found that the status of tribal women in Tripura was not up to the mark. He had forwarded suggestions for the uplift of the status of these women.

Chakravorty (1993) concluded her paper “Economic role and Status of Tribal women in Tripura”, with the sentences that, “Economic participation does have a role in
maintaining the status of tribal women in their society. This status is bound to get eroded with further decline in their participation”. Choudhury (1993) dealt with the status of women in the tribal societies of Tripura in general.

Das Gupta (1993), in her paper dealt with the institution of bride price among the tribals of Tripura, treating the prevalence of this custom as an indicator of high status enjoyed by the tribal women in the state.

The Bulletin of the Department of Folklore and Research, Gauhati University (1995) contained twelve papers related to status of women. Among these papers “Status of Women: A Resume of Anthropological View-points” by Bhattacharya is an important paper which dealt with the concept of status of women. Also it has given an account of ethnography of status of women. The hypotheses and models framed by scholars for examining status of women were also discussed in the paper. In this bulletin Majumder (1995) also dealt with some basic points for consideration regarding ‘status of women, particularly among the plains tribal societies of Assam. In his paper the author made a discussion on the term ‘status’. In his writing he discussed about some causes why women are attributed a lower ‘status’ by the scientists. Similarly, the other papers of the bulletin also dealt with women’s position in various fields of life.

The Trend in Women Studies edited by Pruthi and Sharma (1995) has provided information on different themes related to women society and culture for the convenience of students, researchers, administrators and planners. The book contained eleven chapters, some of whom are ‘Women and Social Order’, Problems of Women’s Freedom’ and ‘Educational Development and Political Status’. The ‘Women in India’ is also an important chapter of this book.
The *Women in Decision making in Private Sector in India* is a collaborative study of Kosambi, Pandey and Poonacha in the year 1996. In the study they had examined the women’s work participation and decision making status in private sector. In their study, the nature of gender constraints that affected the career of these women was also examined. The study was conducted on samples of ten private sector companies among whom six companies are Indian and four are Multinational. The study had highlighted that the proportion of women in the organised sector is small, especially in private industry. The study also shown that those who do appear in this position form the elite of professionally successful Indian women.

Searching about the writings on status of women in tribal society, the researcher went through the book *Status of women in Tribal Society: Arunachal Pradesh* edited by Pandey (1997). The book includes 24 comprehensive papers contributed by Research Officers of Arunachal Pradesh. The project was aimed to know the status of women of Arunachal Pradesh in detail, in their own society and to search the trend of changes and development.

In 1999, Barua in her doctoral thesis examined relative status of employed and non-employed wives of Guwahati in socio-economic background. In her project the Seven-Role Framework of International Labour Organisation (ILO) was followed as base model. Under that framing, she assessed the parental role, domestic role, conjugal role, kin role, individual role, community role and occupational role of the women under discussion.

Brahma (1999), in his article “Role and Status of Bodo women in their study through the ages”, forwarded a brief account on the topic. By summing up the discussion he said that, “Since the early period the position of women in Bodo society has been found
considerably high. So far as the social pattern is concerned it may be said that the Bodo society is not a matriarchal one, rather it is a patriarchal society. Brahma had also given stress in educating their daughters and sisters properly.

Kaniampady (2003) had done her intensive research work on the women working in the Tea plantation. She had conducted her study on three groups of women belonging to different tribal groups.

Manibabu (2006), in his article “Polygene and Status of Tribal women in Manipur: Tradition and Change” (114 - 130), highlighted the impact of polygamy on the relative status of women in the tribal polygynous societies of Manipur and briefly described the erosion of the old values of polygyny due to impact of modernisation. In the study he had observed the dominating status of principal wife. In “Meeitei Family and Status of Women: An Anthropological Preliminary Account”, Manibabu (2006:47-51) has given an account how socio-cultural and economic factors inextricably govern the ascribed status of Meeitei women of Manipur.

The “Status of Women in Tribal society: Perception & Reality (A Micro Study)” is a paper presented by Goswami and Goswami (2007). The paper was based on the field study conducted by the Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, in February 1992. The purpose of the study was to highlight the perception and realities prevailed among the tribal and nontribal women of rural Assam. The study was conducted in two villages of Tinsukia District of Assam. In the research, the information was collected with the help of prepared schedule.

In recent times women studies are conducted under the term ‘Gender Study’. Some relevant works of gender studies were gone through by the researcher.
Raj (1991) in his book *Quest for Gender Justice – A Critique of the Status of Women* brings out vividly the injustices perpetrated on Indian women. He also highlighted the existence of a big gap between theory and practice and between profession and the actual situation regarding the status of women. Conscious of this requirement, several of the articles in this book have offered concrete suggestions to improve the status of Indian women.

Sonalis and Wadhwa (2000) in the book, *Gender - A cross cultural perspective* incorporate various aspects of gender from its subversion to immigration, marriage to motherhood; women of religion, state, politics and finally at work through the lanes and by lanes of history.

Nongbri (2003) in an article “Ethnicity and Gender identity among the Khasi” examines the effect of ethnicity on tribal women. Focused on Khasi, a matrilineal tribe of North East India, it seeks to establish how rising ethnic politics has had adverse effect on women. Since women’s gender identity is generally treated as synonymous with ethnic identity, ethnic politics has the effect of reinforcing women’s subordination.

Nongbri (2003), in her article “Gender Issues and Tribal Development” in the book *Development, Ethnicity and Gender* talks about the issue of gender which has increasingly been recognised as an important variable in development discourse both in the national and international arena. It also focused on the customary laws and practices, their social and political ideology and women’s role in economic and public affairs because it is through these that we get to see how the subjugation of women is legitimized and reinforced.
Kramer (2004), in *The Sociology of Gender –A Brief Introduction* focuses on the family, work and economy and the legal and political systems. Shorter sections discuss gender in language, the media, religion, knowledge systems and education.

Mohanty and Biswal (2007) in the book *Culture, Gender and Gender Discrimination (Caste Hindus and Tribals)* focus on social status of two broad social divisions of the Indian population namely caste Hindu and Tribals comparatively. The study has highlighted various aspects of status identification of men and women including the process of gender discrimination that is culturally inherent. The study provides a very feasible receipt for the welfare of this vulnerable section and how their labour and expertise could be exploited for the welfare of the nation.

Singh (2008), in his book *Discrimination Against Women in India, A Gender Study* focuses on how in the patriarchal society of India varieties of discriminations are found against women, how women are placed in a very disadvantageous position. The writer stated about women oppression that starts from womb to grave. He had emphasised on the equal right of men and women to enjoy fundamental freedoms and human rights.

Recently, in an unpublished thesis of Puwein (2012), entitled “A study on the need and importance of inclusion and participation of the Khasi women in traditional system of Governance in Meghalaya”, submitted in Viswa-Bharati, Sriniketon, the researcher tried to find the need and importance of inclusion and participation of the Khasi women in traditional system of Governance in Meghalaya.

From the reviews it is observed that, the status of tribal women with emphases to patrilineal and matrilineal structures are still to study. Thus it is considered meaningful and academically important matter to go through intensive study, in two contemporary tribes of same area with different social background.
1.9 Methodology

In a scientific research it is necessary to follow appropriate research methods and techniques. For this project also standard anthropological techniques were used. At the beginning a search for permanent settlement and villages of the two communities were made as this researcher wanted to study and compare two communities, viz., the Boros and the Garos. Both the communities are living in the plains of Assam side by side. Therefore it was decided to study two communities and their views on status and position of women in their respective societies. Preliminary survey was made by visiting several villages with some known people. As this researcher worked in this tribal area for long twenty five years it was convenient for her to move freely along with some ex-students and teachers living in these areas. After having a close look on these areas, two areas of Boro and Garo concentration centres are selected for final study. Most of the data were primary but secondary sources were also consulted for this study. For field work the researcher visited house to house to meet the reliable informants and stayed overnight also on various occasions. During 2008 - 2012 several field visits were made to the study villages.

For reviews of literature a good numbers of books, journals, reports and articles were studied. For collection of correct data the following methods have been used. These are case study, schedule, interview (both structured and unstructured questions were used), observation and group discussion. Some Census records were collected from Government office.

Considering the subject ‘women’ and the objective of assessing the status of women in both Boro and Garo societies, responses on different matters related to women were collected from men and women of both the societies. It is pertinent to mention here
that the selections of samples are done on the basis of purposive sampling as a particular type of data was required for this study.

The samples include men and women of both the communities, whether educated or uneducated, irrespective of their occupation. Married men and women are selected for responding the questions of the schedule. Of course, the widows and widowers are also included in samples. Although never married men and women are matured persons, they are not preferred for responding the scheduled questions. Case history, interview and group discussions etc. were conducted with any matured person. The sample size decided for responding scheduled questions were 100 men and 100 women from each society and thus the total number of respondents to the researcher’s queries was 400 altogether from both the societies. Apart from this, 100 girl students (50 Boro and 50 Garo) of high schools and colleges were interviewed on educational issues.