Chapter – II
Women in Garo Society; The Changing Trend

Social progress is closely linked with the role played by women in the society. The progress of a community is judged by the position of females in the society. No region can develop if the women folk are neglected. The great French Idealist, Charles Fourier said, “One could judge the degree of civilization of country by the social and political position of its women”.1 Realizing the women’s role in every sphere of life Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru opined, “To awakened the people, it is women who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”.2 Nehru again said, “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of women.”3 The role, status and position of women can be observed as mother, daughter, and mother in law etc. in the matrix of patriarchal societies in India. But in case of matrilineal societies the position and status of women is different because the girls have social rights to stay with parents after marriage.

Social Status of Women:

The term ‘status’ signifies the sum total of the various culturally ascribed roles one has to play and the rights and duties inherent in a social position.4 Status also encompasses in itself the notions of rights and obligations of superiority and inferiority in terms of power, authority and grading. Each status or position is explained in terms of a ‘role’ or a pattern of behaviour expected of the occupant of a status and role is thus dynamic aspect of behaviour. Role thus expresses the
behavioural pattern of the human beings in a social system of social relationship.\textsuperscript{5}

Zelditch, in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences has used the term ‘status’ to refer either as a synonym for ‘any position in social system,’ i.e. concept of status in the ‘Lintonian sense’ or to any sort of hierarchical ordering of power, wealth or honour. It is also used to refer only to ‘various forms of evaluation such as esteem, prestige, honour and respect.’\textsuperscript{6}

A status is a position in social groups in relation to other positions held by individuals in the same group or groupings. It determines the amount of authority wielded or the degree of submission required. It is the most essential part of life. It gives direct or indirect advantages to an individual.

The concept of status is used to indicate the ordering of individuals in terms of attributes such as, level of education, occupation, income, perception of one’s status within the home and in the community, decision making role, number of restrictions imposed on one’s activities, freedom and so on. Considering the ‘status’ in the light of these attributes, it is to be noted that the level of status of women varies from country to country, the widest difference in levels being between women in developed and developing countries. The level of status of women is low in the developed countries and pitifully low in the developing countries.\textsuperscript{7} Even within a country, the level of status of women differs from rural to urban areas.

The status of women is mostly determined by the structure of the society or family.\textsuperscript{8} When we speak the status of women, we actually refer to the factors like actual treatment given to women, their
legal status, opportunity provided to them for social participation and extent of work in a particular society.

The study related to status of women is nonetheless a study of the roles of women in a particular society. Status, as the term suggests, is a subjective term ad hence its existence is relative. Oxford Dictionary defined it as the “person’s social, legal or professional position or rank in relation to others”. It is a qualitative concept ad hence its mathematical measurement is not always possible.

Indian society is a male dominated society. Women of India were assigned a secondary status, a weaker section of the society who was bounded in the four walls of home. The status of women has changed from time to time. Their position has been variously estimated and diametrically opposite views are held regarding her place in different stages of civilization.

All over the world women play a vital role in society be it patriarchal or matrilineal. Women constitute the 50% of the total world population and perform 67% of the world working hours. Usually the future of the children, their education; health etc. by and large depends on the mother. It must be admitted that women play a greater role in society than we are aware of it. It must also be admitted that in spite of their invaluable contribution towards their society for centuries they were denied of their legitimate rights and position in the society. This is because traditionally women have been concerned only with domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, child rearing and so on. Women in most of the societies are regarded as weaker sex. As such roles assigned to women have been restricted to domestic work. This is the common picture of the Indian society where society and life of the
people are moulded by traditional and spiritual foundations. It is now recognized that the status of women whether in developed or underdeveloped, and matrilineal and patriarchal or patrilineal continues to be inferior to that of men. Although everyone feels that women's role is crucial in family and household economy, still women in general have not yet been given equal rights in social, political as well as economic fields.

The improvement of the status of women have now been realised all over the world as an important aspect of national progress and development. For this realization and growing awareness for improving the condition of women promoting the United Nations to declare 1975 as the International Women's Year. It also declared the years 1975-1985 as the "United Nations Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace."\textsuperscript{13} The U.N. Declarations establishes the general recognition of the principle of equality of men and women and of the multi-dimensional roles women play in the society.

Under the auspices of the United Nations and national Governments, Women Studies began in a big way during the decade 1975-1985. Although the decade ended in 1985, the problem still persists.

In Indian context this becomes all the more important. Although the women in India, especially the metropolitan women have risen to comparatively higher levels, much have still to be done to break the age old prejudices on women's status and position determined by social and religious traditions. The traditional role assigned to women in our society has restricted their mobility. In Hindu tradition, women have been considered to be the prime source of strength as testified in the
methodology and oral history. Theoretically, women have a place of honour in our society. But in practice lot of prejudices stand in the way of treating them as equal with men. Likewise, the Islamic tradition, though speaks of the principle of respect for women and that the Prophet declared “Paradise is at the foot of the mother”, in reality Muslim women are generally backward with neither respect nor any grace.\textsuperscript{14}

**Status of Garo Women:**

As far as the traditional tribal societies of North East India are concerned, the prejudices that are noticed in Pan-Indian scenario, they are relatively less. With the household economic system, practice of shifting cultivation, the landholding pattern and egalitarian ethos, the society does not suffer from prejudice against women. Particularly in Meghalaya, inhabited by the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, the matrilineal system protects to a large extent.

However, at the same time a question arises whether matriliney has assigned a greater role to women. General perception about the matrilineal societies is that women enjoy respectable status compared to their sisters in patriarchal societies. Recent studies have revealed that customary laws do not always protect the interest of women in the present context.\textsuperscript{15} It is to be examined whether the responsibilities shouldered by women in the matrilineal system without access to power do not compromise their role and status in the social order. The question arises because being matrilineal social order women have no decision making authority in the household nor in the socio-political power structures. Noted columnist and gender activist Patricia Mukhim holds, “women are responsible for all the domestic chores but also do farm...
work. In the rural areas women have to fetch water and fuel wood also apart from other duties. In Khasi society women have never been allowed to play a visible role in the ‘Dorber Shnong’ which is the grass-roots political decision making body. The contention is that women are to be represented in the Dorber by male members who are either the maternal uncle, the brother or the husband”. Mukhim is of the view that women suffers in matrilineal society also. Matriliny is just a social system which does not guarantee higher status and position to women. The women are not the decision maker even in the household matters. Husband is the prime decision maker. It indicates the existence of patriarchal values in the matrilineal society.

Jheilin Phanbuh, a Padmashri awardee and the President of ‘Ka Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei’ an umbrella organization of women bodies of Shillong, holds a similar view. According to her, “women in Meghalaya do not enjoy the perceived position and power. Women have no role in the decision making process of our society as they have no representation in the grass-roots Dorber Shnong (Village Council) in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Nokmas in the Garo Hills”.

Crimes against women like domestic violence and rape are on the rise. A large number of women in Meghalaya were facing physical abuse, emotional and mental distress due to the discretion by their husbands despite the matrilineal system. This was revealed by former Chairman, Dr. Biloris Lyndem, Meghalaya State Commission for Women. Within a span of 45 days in 2008, 45 rape cases are registered in this matrilineal society, 72 rape cases were registered in 2006, and in 2007, 77 rape cases were registered in different Police stations in Meghalaya. Among other crimes against women, there were 11 cases of
cruelty by husband.\textsuperscript{21} In the field of literacy number of literate women is comparatively less that of their male counterpart. Percentage of women employed in government as well as private sector is also negligible.

As a member of a matrilineal Garo society, Garo women’s status should have been much better than that of her sisters in patrilineal and patriarchal societies, but in reality as C.R. Marak maintains, there is a subjugation of women. The matrilineal system does not protect their position and right. Marak holds that the status of women in Garo matrilineal society is not better. According to Dr. C.R. Marak, the matrilineal society “female oriented but not female dominated”. According to her, the women have acquired prime position in the society, as they have been seen as natural care gives. However, it does not imply that they dominate in every aspect of family lives.\textsuperscript{22}

In this regard, to check violence and activities against woman the Directorate of Social Welfare, Government of Meghalaya issued a notification to the District Level Committee No. SW(S) 83/96/248/ Dated 21\textsuperscript{st} Feb. 2001, for West Garo Hills District. The notification was issued in connection with the celebration of Women Empowerment Year 2001. Functions of the District Level Committee, as per this notification, are as below.

The main function of the Committee will be as follows:

1. To regularly review the registration, investigation and disposal by trial of cases relating to atrocities against women.

2. To guide, monitor and direct, wherever necessary, registration and investigation of crimes against women. It would maintain close
linkages and coordination with the District Magistrate and the District courts.

3. To take effectively with the concerned authorities the measures required for defense or the rights of women in concrete terms.

4. To provide legal aid and or assist on request women to defend themselves in courts in criminal cases in which women might be implicated.

5. To monitor the action being taken in regard to effective prosecution in individual cases of crimes against women.

6. To network with Family Counseling Centres, Family Courts and Legal Aid Centres.

7. To liaison with Non Governmental Organisations, lawyers, groups educational institutional and the media for propagation of legal literacy among women and raising their consciousness regarding their rights and status.

8. To assist in rendering counsel and legal aid when requested by Voluntary Organisation involved in activities relating to prevent of -
   (a) Deprivation of Women’s rights and
   (b) Non-implementation of legislation enacted to provide protection to women and to promote equality and development of women.

The committee has to meet once in two months and send its report to the State Government regularly.23

Women as a Wife: In the matrilineal Garo society mother or the wife is not the head of the household. It is the father or the husband who is the head of the family. In Garo language the head of the family is known as
'nokgipa'. 'Nokgipa' means owner of the house. The Nokgipa is given topmost priority in every respect. He is the first person to be served food by the wife. The wife is considered as subordinate to him. He can punish any member of the house including his wife in the event of doing something wrong. In no case the wife can raise her hand against her husband. It is considered as a serious matter and a great insult to the Mahari of the husband. In such case the wife is liable to pay fine to her husbands Mahari and suffer the loss of her pigs and cattle.

The household works are normally done jointly by both men and women for the subsistence of the family. But men’s workload is confined to only those that are considered to be masculine or physically tough for the women. Man’s work includes constructing of houses, felling of trees, clearing and burning of jungles for jhum cultivation etc. Rest of the work fall on the soldiers of the women. A woman’s day begins at dawn. She cooks for her family, fetches water, washes utensils, nurses the young one, husks paddy, and collects firewood and so on. Apart from these household works she has to do plantation and harvesting works in the jhuming or agricultural field along with the man. She has to carry the agricultural products from the field to her home. If a man who has physically fit wife or daughter use to do such works, he is dubbed a ‘foolish’ or ‘stupid’ by his Mahari. Keeping the house and surrounding clean, looking after domestic animals, preparation of rice bear etc. are always the responsibility of the women. Besides all these she is also expected to extend financial support to the family even though her husband is physically fit.

Services of the woman to her family in particular and community in general remain unrecognized. Her strength and tenacity,
her talents and abilities remain unaccounted. Rather she is ridiculed by saying – “Do.bok wagam gri, me.chik gisik gri” which means she is just like goat without teeth and lacks brain. 27 The Garo women are used to such derogatory remarks. Such saying definitely implies a low status of the Garo women. Nobody cares that such saying may damage the psychology or mental health of the woman.

Women in the family are expected to respect the elderly males, who may or may not belong to the same sib. A woman who does not show respect to elderly male is despised by saying, “seko pako mande raja” which means ‘she does not honour the father and husband’. 28 While walking on the road along with her husband the wife is normally expected to walk few steps behind him. Only in places which are considered to be dangerous or infested with wild animals the wife and the small children are allowed to walk in front and the man goes behind.

A wife cannot divorce her husband according to her own will. She must first consult her chra or the male elders of her Ma.chong. She has to get their consent first. On the other hand, the chra has the right to separate a wife from her husband if the concerned couple wants to do so. An aggrieved woman has to approach her chra for redress, who will consider the matter from different point of view before taking any step. After careful consideration of the matters placed before him by the woman. The chra takes the final decision. The woman has to abide by the decision of the chra. She cannot raise her head against the decision of her chra. 29 It reveals that the fate of the aggrieved woman depends on her chra, a male. The chra being a male may give his judgement in front of the husband of the aggrieved woman. Probability of denying justice to an aggrieved woman cannot be ruled out in such cases.
The attitudes of male towards women in the matrilineal Garo society can be found in the book “History and Culture of the Garos” (1981) written by Prof. Milton S. Sangma. To quote Sangma “In general, the Garos have a concept about men and women which clearly appears in such remarks as ‘after all women are weak, what they can do without men?’ Another common interesting remark made by the men folk is ‘if I am afraid of my wife, I shall tear my gando.” (The gando is a lion cloth men wear). In no case a Garo man is prepared to be controlled or guided by a woman. To listen to a woman is derogatory to a man.

In the Garo society, like in many other societies, the intellectual capability of women is also underestimated. A popular male attitude towards female is expressed in the following way, “me.chik suri gisik gri”, which means women are like torn garments and are without power of thinking. It clearly indicates a poor estimate about the Garo woman.

The status of Garo women in the 19th century can be known from a paper presented by Miriam Russel, an American Baptist Missionary in 1886. Miriam Russel served as a missionary in the Garo Hills from 1879 till 1884. She presented her paper at the Jubilee Conference of the American Baptist Mission held in Nagaon in 1886. Reflecting on the time she spent with Garo women she wrote, “Unlike women of the plains, they (Garo women) appear to enjoy perfect freedom. They attend religious services, go to the weekly market, visiting neighbouring villages and accompany with male relatives, often visit distant places. When speaking on a man and wife, the woman’s name is mentioned first; this would seem to show respect to her, ............... The Garos say that the man and not the woman would be offended by
inverting the expression. Owing to the fact that property descends through the female instead of the male line (the Garo social structure is matrilineal), the woman seem to have great honour. A more intimate acquaintance with the people however shows that the women are not honoured by the men but are really held in contempt by them. A man may cruelly beat his wife, but if she so much as strikes on him once, he can caste her off. It degrades a man to have a woman sit in front of him. She must not eat before her husband, has been helped............... The freedom of Garo woman differs from that of the Purdah-women of the plains in kind rather than in degree. In both cases, the word of the man is the law that governs her action.”

This paper tries to describe the status of women in the Garo society of the late 19th century. In that period Garo society was matrilineal in structure, clear patriarchal in nature. Women were treated roughly and were considered not equal to their husbands. The wife was under complete control of her husband. Garo society is women centered in composition but men centered in administration.

In the first half of the 20th century women’s condition in Garo society seems to remain the same. Men continued to ill treat their subordinate or dependent women. Women had no voice at all. They were completely under the male domination. The picture of the miserable condition of Garo women in their society can be found in the following lines of the poem “The Woman” written by Jonmoni D. Shira, in 1940.

From the tender age
I have to live under the control of man
At the slap of my younger brother
I weep loudly.
To sit in the dumping place of chaff
To eat the leftovers, is my lot;
I get ridicule from the fellow human beings,
Because of my loneliness. 33

In the light of such conditions of life of the Garo women we can imagine their position in the Garo society. In the early part of the 20th century Garo women occupy a very low position in their social system.

With the change in status and role of women throughout the world, there has been a lot of change in the status and role of women in India, especially after independence. The constitution of India guarantees equality of both sexes in all walks of life. Today, women are not confined to the four walls of their home. They perform variety of works in various fields. Their attitude towards life, goal, and perception has also undergone changes. Attitude towards women in the Garo society has also been changed their status is improving. Education along with Christianity, modern means of transport and communication, employment, industrialization and exposure to other forces of change made impact in the status and position of women. These have brought about tremendous changes to the social institutions also.

The changing trend in the social outlook of the representative villages of the Resubelpara Development Block can be seen with the dawn of the 20th century. To study the changing trend of the Garo society in general and women in particular a field level survey was conducted in the Resubelpara Development Block under East Garo Hills district. Survey was conducted in 15 villages of the Block. For that purpose one village from each Gram Seva circle was selected. Informations collected through structured questionnaire. Opinions were
sought from the senior most female member of the House (who is in most cases the *Nokna*). The survey was conducted in between January 2007 to June 2009. Age of the respondent women varies from 25 to 62 years. It becomes clear from their response, that today's women consider themselves to be equal with men. Enlightened women of the sample villages in particular feel that women should be given all possible opportunities for self development. Qualified women should be employed like men in all occupations. Most of the educated women have now started to work in office and private firms. Economic empowerment or women in Garo society now become visible. Economic empowerment helps them to influence their husbands and family members while taking decisions. Education together with job holding by women results in the improvement of their status and position in the society.

In our study it is found that of the total 340 respondent 283 women i.e. 83.23% are literate and only 57 women i.e. 16.77 are illiterate. It may be mentioned here that women literacy rate in Meghalaya is higher than the national average. Women literacy rate is higher in the Resubelpara Development Block amongst the Block of the East Garo Hills District according to 2001 census. The levels of education of the respondents can be shown in the Table.2.1.
Table 2.1

Level of Women Education in the Investigated Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>% to total Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>24.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Upper Primary/Middle</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>36.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>31.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>H.S.L.C.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>H.S.S.L.C.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>P.G.</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>279</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey.

From this table it is clear that 38.71% (31.19 + 5.73 + 1.43 + 0.36) of the Garo women are educated up to the high school level. However, the percentage of women having college education is only 1.79. Only 5 of our respondents are found to have education at post High School Level. Although progress of education among the Garo women in particular appears to be very slow and most of them do not possess high level of education, they become able to learn for the family which helps them to raise their voice in family matters including education and marriage of their children, buying and selling durable goods and other properties etc. In this regard Smt. Viola Sonatchi B. Sangma holds, “In the home front, mother of the family holds sway in matters of making decisions. Much of the decisions are outlined by mothers. In many times, husband respect their spouses for their contribution towards running their homes in matters of family budget, raising children, advice, comments and sometimes valuable instructional guidance.”  

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Now-a-days in may of the households both husband and wife use to take decision jointly. Women are even found to be the prime decision maker in few families. They neither depend on their husband nor on the Maharies for taking decision on matters concerning herself. Just for the sake of formality only opinion of the husband is sought. In our investigation it was understood that 42.64% of our respondents use to take decisions jointly with their husband. 2.65% of the respondents are independent decision makers.

Thus Education has definitely brought about some economic self dependency to the Garo women. Educated Garo women now started to work in government and non-government offices also.

The most important change in the present day Garo society is seen in the attitude of husbands to their wives. Garo husbands now a days do not treat their wives as inferior to them. Rather, they consider their wives as equal with them. Shri G.A. Sangma, a School teacher from Bakenang Nalsa village hold, “I do not consider my wife inferior to me. In fact it is her house, her property and I am the custodian. Household decision we use to take mutually”. Similar view is also held by Shri Albert Cheran Momin who told that “In Garo society we do not consider females inferior to male. Customarily, husband is the head of the household, but real owner is the wife. Household level decisions are always taken in consultation with the wife.”

* Source: Field investigation, village Bakenang Nalsa, East Garo Hills, Dated 17.10.2007
** Source: Field investigation, village Chitukona Garo, East Garo Hills, Dated 26.04.2009
Role of Women in the *Mahari*: *Mahari* was a very important social institution of the traditional Garo society. It played an important role in the activities of its members. *Mahari* acted as a decision making body and custodian of its own members. *Mahari* was a male dominated institution and still remains to be so. In this social institution of the traditional Garo society women had no role to play. She had no voice at all. In fact, they had no voice even in determining their own affairs. Status of women in relation to the *Mahari* in the traditional Garo society can be understood from the observation of D.N. Majumdar. As stated by D.N. Majumdar, "In the affairs of the *Mahari*, the women have no voice at all. Such matters are decided exclusively by the male elders...... As the males do not consider the opinion of the women to influence the *Mahari* affairs, except through her husband. Even regarding matters concerning women, the opinion of the women concerned or the women in general, of the *Mahari*, is not considered as essential. Women must always abide by the decisions of the male elders. Marriages are settled by the *Mahari* and the opinion of the girl is not considered significant. The *Mahari* can decide to give a very young girl in marriage to an elderly person, and the girl has no redress." A woman is expected to abide by the decisions of the *Mahari*. If the *Mahari* decide that it is not proper for a particular girl to stay with her husband, they can even force the couple to get separated. Such circumstances is called 'Saleka' by the Garos which literally means 'to snatch away'. The woman is not expected to express any personal opinion in such matters. If the *Mahari* decide to provide a widowed man with a young girl as a replacement for the deceased wife, the girl has no alternative but to abide by the decision of the *Mahari*. She likes it or not is not a thing to be bothered about.

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In case of selecting a *Nokrom* i.e. resident son-in-law the concerned girl has no right to choose by her self. The *Nokrom* is selected by the elderly male members of the *Mahari*. The girl has to obey the collective decision of the elderly male members of the *Mahari*. Customarily resident son-in-law must be belong the nephew of her father (son of father’s sister). If such suitable boy is not available, she must marry only man from her fathers *Ma.chong*. Such a daughter has no free choice to select her male, because she will have to marry the proper blood kin of her father so that the marital alliance between her mother’s lineage and her father’s lineage remain unbroken. It is not regarded as obligatory for them to marry a close kin of her father. The *Mahari* also arranges remarriage for widow or divorced women from among the *Mahari* members.\(^37\)

In the earlier days women could not take part in *Mahari* meetings. *Mahari* meeting refers to the assembly of the elderly male members of a *Mahari*. In the traditional Garo society *Mahari* meetings were considered to be the platform of the male members. The elderly male members of the respective *Maharies* used to discuss different issues like settlement of girls’ marriage, selection of *Nokna*, inheritance of property, dispute between members within the *Mahari* or inter *Mahari* disputes. Women could attend such meetings just as a silent listeners.\(^38\)

But in present times things have undergone a change. Now women can actively take part in deliberations of the *Mahari* meetings. During our investigation it is found that all the respondents take part in *Mahari* meetings in some way or others. They enjoy the right to speak in such discussion. Educated women in particular actively participate in *Mahari* meetings. It is also found that in some cases women also call
*Mahari* meetings. When they feel the necessity of discussing certain important matters in their respective *Maharies*. Garo women now a days do not consider the *Mahari* meeting as the male business. They are of the view that they are also the member of the *Mahari*, so they have every right to participate in *Mahari* meetings. Present day Garo women do not consider themselves equally eligible with man to participate in *Mahari* meetings. Some of them even protest *Mahari* decisions whenever necessary. In our investigation, we had an attempt to assess the extent of their confident on the *Mahari* and their opinion about *Mahari* decisions. The following table gives an idea of their confidence on the *Mahari* and what they do if the decision given by the *Mahari* is not found to be satisfactory.

**Table: 2.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Views held by the respondents</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>% of total Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Protest the decision</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>10.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Do not protest</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>26.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Request for reconsideration</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>52.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>340</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey

Out of the total respondents, only 10.88% hold that they do not accept the *Mahari* decision blindly. They protest against its decision if the same cannot satisfy their needs and interests. On the other hand 26.18% of them will abide by the decision of the *Mahari* since *Mahari*'s decision is a collective decision of senior male members. While 52.94%
are for requesting the Mahari to review the decisions if it goes against their interest.

Thus, the Mahari meetings which were considered as purely male’s business in traditional Garo society is now wide open for both male and female. Greater number of women now attends and participates in the discussions of the Mahari meetings. The way in which the women participate in Mahari meeting can be shown in the following table.

Table: 2.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Way of participation</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>% of total Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>By initiating Mahari Meeting</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>20.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Actively participating in Deliberation</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>28.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>By simply attending</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>24.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Any other/ Providing Hospitality to the participants *</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>25.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey

* Hospitality includes providing tea, water, rice, betel nut etc.

The above table shows that 20.88% of the total respondent says that they use to call Mahari meeting when some important matters cannot be decided at the family level. 28.53% of them actively participated in decision making along with the male members of the Mahari. 24.71% of the respondents just attend Mahari meetings without any active participation. Since Mahari is concerned with the problems of all its members, they use to attend the Mahari meetings. However, 25.88% is confined with providing hospitality to the Mahari members during the course of meeting. Hospitality includes serving tea, betel nut, pan, water, rice etc.
From the above analysis we can come to the conclusion that Garo women no longer remain submissive. Their active participation is now visible in their social system. In course of time greater number of women will definitely come forward to take part in Mahari meetings. Change of their attitude towards their role and place in the Mahari will definitely enable to attend their due status and share in their social system.

In the traditional Garo society girls particularly the heiress ones did not have any say in selecting their life partners. But now the picture is getting changed.

In present day Garo society girls can enjoy greater freedom in choosing their life partners. It is found in our investigation that of the 340 respondents 279 women (i.e. 82.06%) have self arranged marriages and only 19.64% women have negotiated marriage.

On the other hand 92.35% of the respondents have no objection in allowing their daughters to choose their life partners provided they obey the marriage customs. Only 7.64% of the respondents do not want their daughters to be married according to their own wishes. They held that before marriage they (daughters) must take the consent of their parents and chra and the consent of the Mahari will also sought.

Some educated women hold that decision of Mahari regarding the marriage of their daughters no longer remains binding. Mahari also remains uninterfering in such matters. Only when, Mahari is called upon by a family, for taking crucial decision it takes decision on behalf of that family. But it does not mean that Mahari has nothing to do in the present day Garo society. Mahari of the respective side of the bride
and the groom use to have *Mahari* meeting for formal negotiation even in the case of self arranged marriages.

In the earlier times young girls were compelled by the *Mahari* to marry an old man even of the age of her father. But now a day girl can raise their voice against such decisions of *Mahari*. The young girls of Resubelpara villages do not accept the idea of marrying an old person with encumbrances.

Development of education and regular contact with the urban areas has given higher expectations. Present generation girls would not agree to get married with an old man or a widower. Rather they prefer to marry suitable boy from other communities. The educated sections get opportunity to mix up with people from other ethnic groups or communities and hence their sphere of selection of life partners has also been broadened. That is one of the reasons why educated Garos go for inter ethnic or inter-community marriages. Generally inter-community marriages take place among the educated section of the society.

In case of inter-ethnic or inter-community marriages, the boy marrying a Garo girl has to adopt the religion and culture of the Garos. In this regard Prof. Milton S. Sangma says that if a non-Garo man marries a Garo girl he may adopt the opposite clan of his wife, he may be treated as Garo. For all purposes he should behave as a Garo. Again same is the case when non-Garo girl marriages a Garo boy, the girl has to follow all the customs of the Garo society and adopt a clan other than her husband’s clan as her own clan. For all purposes she should also behave like a Garo. Then only she can be treated as Garo.39

The Garos by and large support inter-community marriage and they do not discourage or lookdown such unions. During our
investigation it has been found that 308 respondents (i.e. 90.59%) supports inter community marriage while only 32 of them (i.e. 9.41%) are against it. In our Resubelpara investigation we have meet 16 respondents who have inter community wed lock. Of these 16 respondents 10 are married to Rabhas, 2 to groom of Bihari community, 1 to an Assamese boy, 1 to a Bangalee and 2 to boys of Muslim community. Number of such marriages may be greater in the urban areas where they get ample opportunity to mix-up with different communities. From these examples we feel that Garos are becoming liberal in inter community marriage.

The traditional custom regarding *Do.sia* marriage (as discussed in Chapter 1) is no longer strictly followed by the Garos. A couple can just live as husband and wife without any resistance from the society or from their respective family members. Both among the converts and non-converts a man and a woman can live together as husband and wife and they are accepted as husband and wife by the society even without any formal marriage. Their children will be treated at per with the children born to parents married formally according to traditional customs.

Violation of the rules of exogamy was severely dealt with and heavy Punishment was accorded according to the traditional norm in the earlier times. But today ‘*Bakdong*** is no more cognizable offence and thus accepted. *Madong*** unions was also punishable among non-

* *Bakdong*-couple who marry in the same clan

** *Ma.dong*-couple marrying within the *ma.chong* (Goswami and Majumdar, 1972) Pp.121 & 124
Christians. Among the Christian section such marriage was not performed in the Church. Even no social feast was arranged (For e.g. see Chapter 1). In present day Garo society there are many examples of Bakdong as well as Madong marriages.

Position of Women in the Community/ Village:

In matters concerning the administration of the village, social feast and ceremonies functions, women occupy the lowest position in the society. A woman can never be a village headman (Nokma). A Nokma has to perform certain ceremonial functions and rites in his locality which cannot be perform by a woman. The position occupied by women in the village affairs is considered to equivalent to that of children. The Garo phase "me.chik bi.sa desa" literally means women children.

Women were not allowed to enter the bachelor dormitory. Only on certain occasion like village feast or festivals women were allowed to enter the dormitory and that too through the back door. Only the Nokma's wife could enter the dormitory through the front entrance.

In the village feast or ceremonials seats were reserved for persons of honour. No woman was regarded as person of honour. So no women could sit with the dignitaries. Even the elderly women could not sit with elderly male. Women's irrespective of age were given seat along with bachelors and children. The sitting arrangement for ceremonial function can be shown With the help of the following diagram.
Sitting Arrangement in Ceremonial Functions

1. Front entrance  2. Place for bachelors, women and children
3. Ceremonial Post  4. Place for village elders (male)
5. Passage to outside  6. Place for honoured person
7. Place for honoured person  8. Passage to inner room
9. Place for honoured person.

(Ground Plan of a Traditional Type of house showing the sitting arrangement of different categories of Individuals on Ceremonial Occasion.)

Source: Goswami, M.C. and Majumdar, D.N., Social Institutions of the Garo of Meghalaya, 1972, P.60

In the village feasts and ceremonies women could play only an auxiliary role. They were engaged in cooking and preparing rice-beer, fetching water, washing utensils etc. Their duty was to serve the guests and villagers. On the other hand men folk sit, chat and gossip with fellow villagers for hours. In simple terms in feasts and ceremonies men enjoy and women has to serve.

In the village meetings women were the silent spectators. They had nothing to do in the community decisions. A cases/matters
were tried by the *Nokma* with the assistance of the elderly male members of the village.\textsuperscript{46} To quote D.N. Majumdar, "Women were quite excluded from the village administration."\textsuperscript{47} During the British period, British created the posts of *Laskars* and *Sardars* along with *Nokmas* for the administration of justice in the Garo Hills and they were all male. This means no women were in the village administration.

Now a days Garo women use to take active part in the ceremonial functions in their locality. This includes religious meetings, social feasts, Christmas celebration, marriage ceremony, New Year’s Day celebration etc. It may be noted that most of such functions are of religious in nature or based in religion. Such religious functions includes ‘Bible learning camp, Christian Leadership Programme, Church level and *Mondoli*\textsuperscript{*} level meetings, participation in religious conference, arrangement of prayer etc. Now women can participate in the ceremonial functions without any restriction from any other quarter. Women’s way of participation in ceremonial functions can be understood from the following table.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Way of Participation in Ceremonial Functions}
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|c|c|}
\hline
Sl. No. & Way of participation & Number of Respondents & \% of total Respondents \\
\hline
a & As an organizer & 12 & 3.53 \\
b & As an Adviser & - & - \\
c & As an Active member & 143 & 42.06 \\
d & As an Ordinary member & 170 & 50 \\
e & Any other & - & - \\
\hline
Total & & 325 & 95.59% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{*} *Mondoli* refers to a zone covering number of Churches.
The above table shows that only few women i.e. 3.53% take head as organizers of such ceremonial functions. 42.06% of them participate as active member while 50% participate as ordinary member in the ceremonial functions. 15 of our respondents do not participate in ceremonial functions either due to their old age or lack of interest.

Thus it is understood that women who have interest in the ceremonial functions can take part in someway or other without any bar from the society.

Women and Inheritance of Property: There are traditional rules of inheritance of property recognized by the Garo Customary Laws. In the Garo society property is inherited in the female line, but a man must be there to manage it. In no case a woman sells or transfers any property. In this regard, inheritances of property among the Garos have the similarity with the Khurichia Nayars, a sub-caste of Nayars tribe of Kerala. Property among the Khurichian Nayars is inherited by the female line, but there must be a man to manage it. In the Garo society heiress to the property shall be the daughter or adopted daughter as the case may be but never a son. The heiress is selected by the parents, chra and the Mahari. In the absence of chra and Mahari the parents also have the right to select heiress. If there is no female members in the family to inherit land in the family then the wife’s sister daughter is adopted. In order to keep the landed property within the lineage, the nephew is taken as son-in-law.

Although the woman is the sole owner of the property, the husband has the full right to use his wife’s property. He cannot dispose it away, but otherwise his authority on his wife’s property cannot be
questioned. The husband is the guardian and custodian of the property including landed property.\textsuperscript{51} In reality, a Nokma is always looked upon as the owner of the lands in spite of the fact that he has derived his rights over the property by virtue of being the husband of the woman who inherits it. The wife’s name as the owner of the property is mentioned only for some legal matters. From this it appears that Garo society was never matriarchal. A woman is merely the vehicle by which property descends from one generation to another.\textsuperscript{52}

But from what had been told by Charles G. Momin, the Vice President cum Chief Organizer of Council of Nokma in this regard it is understood that the earlier concept of “women cannot be a Nokma” is no more relevant in the present day Garo society, in the entire Garo Hills there are 167 women Nokmas at present.\textsuperscript{53} However, we did not meet women Nokma in our study area.

Majumdar opines, “property among the Garos is inherited along the female line. However, a woman is not regarded as the absolute owner of property. She cannot dispose her property at her will. Her husband always acts as the manager of property and in his absence the leaders of the Ma.chong decide about the disposal of property.”\textsuperscript{54}

In case of widowers, property may be managed by themselves for which they may take advice of the Chra. But such cases are very rare due to the prevalence of the replacement system. According to the A.kim Law widowed spouse has to be provided with a replacement of the deceased one by the Mahari. But in some cases Mahari may not provide replacement. The Mahari may refuse to provide replacements to those women, who are too old to have a husband, or are notorious for their evil nature or suffer from some physical defects.\textsuperscript{55} Only such
women, who are regarded as next to the destitute, remain as widows. Their position is distinctively low.

Under the matrilineal social system two types of property are recognized – inalienable and alienable. The first one is ancestral and latter one is personal. Generally, inheritance of ancestral land and property passes from the mother to the daughter.

Although, the daughter legally inherits the ancestral property she only holds it without any right or power to dispose or transfer the same according to her own will. She cannot do anything without the knowledge and consent or her brothers. The heiress woman is merely the custodian of the ancestral property while the real control over them is vested with the hands of the matriline. Ancestral properties are regarded as unalienable and cannot be alienated without the consent of the possible heiress of the family. Personal property can be disposed of according to the will of the owner of the property.

Among the Khasis, ancestral property passes from the mother to the youngest daughter. In Khasi language youngest daughter is called Ka-Khadduh. If the Ka-Khadduh dies the property is inherited by her immediate elder sister. If there is no other daughter in the family, succession will pass on to the sisters of the mother and their female descendants.

Even the man has the right over his personal property which he can utilize by himself. His Kur, i.e. clan cannot claim any right over such property.

In the Jaintia society which is also matrilineal in nature women's position is somewhat different from that of the women of Garo and the Khasi society. Firstly women in the Jaintia society are both
holders and keepers of property of the family. Property includes both moveable and immovable properties. Secondly, except in political matters they are treated as equal with men. However, they are not expected to develop an air of superiority over men. In domestic affairs, women in Jaintia society have an important role to perform because they are bound to take personal care of the children. The husband according to the earlier practice need not live with the wife and the children. Hence the entire responsibility of looking after their children falls on the mother.62

Ancestral property in the Jaintia society also passes from mother to daughter. Male members cannot inherit ancestral property. If a man with acquired property dies and his mother is still alive than his property will go to his mother and not his wife and children. A widow may go for remarriage. If she does not go for remarriage then only she will be entitled to inherit half of her husband’s property. In the event of her death her youngest daughter will inherit that property. Property thus inherited by the mother will go to her youngest daughter as such property is also regarded as ancestral. Like any other ancestral property such property also cannot be alienated without the consent of all heirs in the entail and brothers and uncles.63

In the traditional matrilineal society son could not inherit ancestral property. But attitude towards man’s right to property is getting changed. Recently, a section of enlightened class is considering the issue of recognition of inheritance to sons. This is a recent development in Garo society. This is not in accordance with the customary law of inheritance. In the traditional society man cannot claim or inherit ancestral property. Now days in many cases Garo boys are also given
share of landed property of their parents, along with their sisters. When a son is given a share of the parental property, he can fully enjoy it during his lifetime. But after his death the same may go back to his Mahari.

In our study also it has been found that there is change of attitude in this issue 11.18% of our respondents are in favour of giving share of parental property to the male child. This group of respondents might have been impressed by the system prevailing in the patriarchal societies prevailing in the neighbouring Assam. This can be regarded as the beginning of change in attitude towards man’s right to ancestral property. Female child is still more preferred by the Garos. It is found that 88.82% of the respondents prefer girl child to continue the matrilineal social order by giving the right to inheritance of property to girls.

The custom of child adoption is prevalent among the Garos. Usually, a couple having no female issue adopts a daughter and nominates her as heir. In our field investigation it is found that 70.07% of the respondents are for adoption of girl child if and when necessary.

The principle followed in adoption is that the girl adopted should be of closest blood relation with the principal female of the family. Normally a childless women prefers to adopt her own sister’s daughter. Because, according to Garo social ethos a sister’s daughter is considered as equivalent to a real daughter. The adopted daughter enjoys all the legitimate right over household possession. She inherits the property of her foster parents and shows allegiance to them. If the adopted daughter betrays her foster parents and do not look after them in their old age respective Mahari has the right to interfere. If such a
situation arises the *Mahari* can deprive the adopted girl from the inheritance of property.

Now a days orphans are also adopted by the Garos. In adopting orphan also they generally go for girl child. In such case the child is adopted from the infancy, so that she never develops any bad feeling towards her foster feelings. For example, Shri Subroto D. Marak of village Mendal married to Smt. Elizabeth B. Marak of Mendipathar village in January, 2008. Before being formally married they lived together for four years without any issue. After their formal marriage they have adopted a female child from the Bengalee community of Goalpara district of Assam. There are such other examples of adoption of girl child from Nepali and Rabha community in the Resubelpara Block. It shows that the custom of adoption is still prevalent in Garo society which no longer is limited to the closest blood relations of the principal female members of the family. The child to be adopted need not necessarily be from the Garo community. Any girl from any community may be adopted according to one’s choice.

Acquisition of private property and shift of emphasis from the lineage group to nuclear family may be the cause of such change or attitude towards selection of child for adoption.

**Garo Women and Religion:** Traditionally the Garos use to worship different deities and spirits. Almost all the deities and spirits worshipped by them bear male characteristics. *Tatara-Rabuga, Saljong, Nostu Nopantu, Chorabudi, Goera, Kalkame, Susime or Rokkime, Asima-Dingsima* are the principal spirits while the Garos use to worship.
Tatara-Rabuga is looked upon as the greatest of the spirits worshipped by the Garos. At his command the world had been made by two lesser spirits, namely, Nostu-Nopantu and Matchi.

Saljong is the God of fertility and the giver of all things to man. He is represented by the Sun. Wangala, the biggest harvest festival is celebrated in his honour.

Nostu-Nopantu fashioned the earth with another spirit called Matchi. The Garos considered them to be good spirit and believed that they do not harm any man. No sacrifice is offered to this spirit.

Chorabudi is the protector of the ‘crops’. Sometimes sacrifices are offered to Chorabudi for relief of earache and pain.

Goera is the God of strength and creates thunder and lightning. The Garos use to sacrifice a pig, a fowl or a duck in his name at the foot of a tree.

Kalame is a brother of Goera and protects all men from danger, from wild animals and disasters. Generally, a goat or a cock is sacrificed in his name.

Susime or Rokime is the Goddess of wealth. She is represented by the moon. A pig, a fowl and some liquor are the things to be offered to Susime (Rokime).

Asima-Digsima is the mother of the Susime who does not bear any characteristics of deities. There is a superstition among the Garos that Susime, the Goddess of wealth may be offended if some one takes the same of Asima-Dingsima.

Besides these above mentioned deities there are number of other god and evil-spirits to whom the Garos worship to gain their favour.
Almost all the deities bear the characteristics of male except Susime (or Rokime) and Asima Dingsima. However, Burling regards the deities worshipped by the Garos as neither male nor female. Burling writes “Garos were puzzled, for instance by the question of whether the spirits were male or female. “Their common reply is that ‘we do not know what they look like because we cannot see them.”\textsuperscript{68}

Coming to the question of status of women and religion, it is observed that the priest for all religious purposes is always a male. The priest is called ‘Kamal’ by the Garos. In no religious ceremony women can take any active part. A woman priest is totally unheard of in traditional Garo society. For propitiating evil spirits which afflict a family member, an elderly male performs the ritual if he is conversant with the rituals. If he is not conversant, then he engages the village Priest. The only ceremony where a woman’s presence is essential is the ‘Gana ceremony’.\textsuperscript{69} In Gana ceremony a male must perform the Gana dance with his wife in public. A widower cannot perform this ceremony unless he takes a second wife.

Several factors may be ascribed for such a complete subjugation of females in the traditional Garo society. Women had far less opportunities than male to go outside their homes and villages to be in contact with the outside world. They were tied down by domestic activities. Their constant engagement in work which is the back-breaking nature do not allow them to stand, watch and observe the outside world. There were no avenues open to women for self improvement and broadening of knowledge in any field. Women activities were confined with traditional way of life which centres around marriage and jhum cultivation only.
The people of all the villages taken for our investigation are converted to Christianity. Baptist, Catholic, Seven days Adventist Christian denominations had worked among the Garos. Numbers of Baptized Garos are more than the Catholic and Seven days Adventist. The people not only accepted Christianity but also help in spread of Christianity. They go to the Church every Sunday and Thursday. For the Baptists women's prayer is organized on every Wednesday, apart from general prayer of Sunday and Thursday.

Among the Catholics and Seven Days Adventists, Church prayer is conducted every Sunday and Saturday respectively.

With the conversion to the Christianity, the Garos have given up their earlier practices and rituals. The Christian sections now do not sacrifice to propitiate any deities and spirits which they did in earlier days. Households rituals have been replaced by prayer meetings. A Christian house may organize prayer on different occasions such as on birthday celebration, when the children are to appear examination or go for higher studies in distant place, when a family member get a job, for speedy recovery of an ill person etc. Friends and relatives are invited to the prayer meeting. Among the Baptist section the Pastor of the local church is invited to the prayer meetings. All participants collectively offer pray to Christ for His blessings. Women also participate in such prayer meetings. Sometimes they also take the lead in such prayer meeting.

Although no female Pastor is there in the villages of our study it has come to our knowledge that in some other places there are female Pastors.
Mr. Tony C. M. Sangma told us that there is no restriction for women to become Pastor or Reverent. They can conduct prayer meeting in the villages or in the local Church. He further said that there are many Garo women Pastor or Reverent among the Baptist section of the Garos.70

Among the Catholic section of the Garos, prayer is conducted by the ‘Father’ of the local church. In his absence, a ‘Nun’ or a ‘Sister’ has to conduct the Prayer meetings.

Now a days there many Garo male ordained as ‘Reverent’ ‘Father’ or ‘Brother’ among the Catholic section. Many Garo girls also have been found as ‘Nun’ or ‘Sister’ in different churches and educational institutions run by Catholic Missionaries.

The Garo women seem to be comparatively free from superstition. Unlike their Grand mothers, mothers and aunts the women of the present day Garo society go to doctors in case of disease instead of taking help of traditional rituals. However, they have faith on locally available herbal medicine.

Social Awareness of Garo Women:

Awareness is defined as an informed consciousness of an individual.71 Social awareness it means the individual consciousness about the happenings of the society. At the personal level it refers to consciousness of an individual in different spheres of human activity. Again society has a dynamic character. Thus, dynamism has brought into existence this modern social set up of 21st century' from that of the primitive age. During this long course of journey society has brought in a
lot of new things and ideas for the benefit of the later generation. All the individuals therefore, must concern about the changing norms of the society.

With the development of education, introduction of modern means of transport and communication, expansion of media etc. Garo society in general and women in particular becoming aware in different activities of life.

Now a days Garo women are for small family. Educated and literate women who have frequent touch with the people of the urban areas become aware of the benefit of the family planning and health care of mothers. Family Planning as an official programme was adopted by the Government of India in 1951, with the main aim to reduce the birth rate to a level the economy would sustain. Family Planning became a target oriented programme with the Maternal & Child Health (MCH) Programme after 1966. The family planning programme was declared by the Government of India as purely a voluntary programme. It was renamed as Family Welfare Programme in 1976.

The Government of Meghalaya implements the various Family Welfare Programme launched by the Central Government through the Directorate of Health Services, in the nature of advertising through news paper, television, hoardings and organizing awareness campaigning through Community Health Centres. During field investigation it is found that only 67 respondent aware of the family planning and they support it on different grounds. The responds for family planning has been presented in the table below.
Table 2.5

Attitude towards Family Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Reasons for Family Planning</th>
<th>No. of Respondent</th>
<th>% of total Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>One/ two child is sufficient</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>For mothers health and better care of children</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Economic consideration</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Any other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>19.71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19.71%

Source: Field investigation.

The above data shows that only 19.71% respondent is aware and support family planning. Those who support family planning 6.47% feel that one or two child is sufficient. 4.71% of them feel that family planning is good for their own health as well as for better care of children, 8.53% support family planning for economic consideration. However, majority of the respondents are not aware of family planning. It is true that uneducated and illiterate people do not understand family planning, so they are not aware of it. Moreover, Governments publicity and programmes yet to reach the interior part of the region. But what is observed in Garo society is that in the rural area economically sound family has more children than poor and uneducated family. It was found that the couple inter-ethnic marriage has comparatively more children than those married within the community. Family Planning is a recent concept in the Garo society. Even in urban and sub-urban area also up to the later part of 20th century people did not bothered about family planning.
During field investigation it is found that most of the respondents got married between 18 to 25 years of age. They constitute 71.18% (242) of the total respondent. At the time of field investigation (April 2007 – June 2009) their age was within 45 years of age. Few job holding women (6 nos.) married in between 25 to 30 years. Rest of the respondent women i.e., 92 (27.06%) got married below 18 years of age. They constitute the older section of respondents whose present age is more than 50 years. It shows that traditionally Garos practiced early marriage. But now a days this traditional practice of early marriage is decreasing.

It is found that Garo women in general are not highly qualified. They do not have high level formal education. But through radio, television and news paper etc. many of them have come to know many things. They are very fond of listening radio and television programme. Electricity yet to be provided many of the Garo villages. Even in such villages economically sound families buy television and operate with battery. People of the village both male and female father in the television possessing house after dinner which they usually take just after sunset and watch different programmes. Their preferred programmes can be shown in the following table.
Table: 2.6

Programme Preferred by Women in Television/Radio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Programme preferred</th>
<th>No. of Respondent</th>
<th>% of total Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Only News</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Both News and Entertainment</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Only Entertainment</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>23.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Other (business educational, agriculture, advt. etc)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>128</strong></td>
<td><strong>37.64%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey.

The above table shows that 37.64% of our respondents watch/listen television/radio while 62.36% do not. It also appears that for none of the respondents ‘news’ is the only preference. However, 8.23% are interested both in news and entertainment programme, 23.82% interested only in entertainment programme and 5.59% has no preference. They like to listen/watch different programmes like educational, agricultural, business, advertisement etc. or whatever is available.

‘The Shillong Times’, ‘The Meghalaya Guardian’ are the English daily circulated in Garo Hills. There is also, ‘The Janera’, a Garo daily news paper, which is published from Tura. Only 10.29% of our respondents use to read newspaper. Of whom 27 respondents are regular and others are not regular readers. It is clear that 89.71% of the respondents do not read newspaper. The reasons behind not reading can be shown in the table 2.7.
Table: 2.7

Causes for Not Subscribing Newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Reasons for not reading</th>
<th>No. of Respondent</th>
<th>% of total Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Cannot afford</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>31.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Cannot read</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>21.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Non Availability</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>32.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Lack of interest</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>Any other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Investigation.

The above table reflects that couple of reasons responsible for which women do not have touch with newspapers. It is seen that 31.77% respondent not read newspaper as they cannot subscribe due to poverty. While 21.17% cannot read. 32.94% hold that newspapers are not available in their locality. To get a newspaper they have to go far for their locality. So it is difficult for them to read newspaper. Only 2.35% however hold that they do not have interest in reading newspaper. The above table gives an impression that majority of the respondent do not have the opportunity to read newspaper. It is not because all except a few are uninterested in reading newspaper. Due to their poverty, illiteracy, non availability etc. Garo women remain cot off from the day to day information.

**Women and Customary Laws:** Garo women in general are satisfied with the customary laws as it gives property rights to them. They obey and respect Garo customary laws. But enlightened and educated women
have expressed their dissatisfaction for some of the customary laws like ‘a.kim’, ‘dokchapa’, ‘on.songa’ since these customary laws undermine the interest of the women. However, with the pace of modernization and expansion of education remarkable change have also been taken place in the Garo society. Dokchapa is no more practice among the Christian section. In case of choice of groom for the heiress daughter, it is no longer restricted to the nephew of the father only. Now-a-days one may go for a suitable groom other than her father’s nephew. In Resubelpara we met a Nokma married to a boy who is not the nephew of her father. Similarly replacement of tender girl to a widower irrespective of ages and without the consent of the girl is no longer practiced. Replacement is provided to a widower only when a matured girl is available in his deceased wife’s Mahari.

Further the consent of the girl is also taken into account. Unwilling girls are not forced to accept the proposal for replacement. During our field investigation we met two widowers, one in Matchuki village and the other Rongpetchi villages. The widower of the Matchuki village is 52 years old whose wife died two years back. Customarily it is the duty of the deceased wife’s Mahari to provide other women as his second wife. But no girl in the concerned Mahari could be found to be willing none of the girls from deceased to marry the widowed person. As a result, deceased wife Mahari could not provide replacement for the widowed.74

However, in case of Shri Tesbin T. Sangma, another widower, from Rongpetchi village was provided replacement. His first wife Oxybath G. Momin died without any issue. The Mahari of his deceased spouse provided the younger sister of his former wife, Dambat
G. Momin as the replacement. His second wife Dambat G. Momin died after giving birth to four children. Again the Mahari of Dambat G. Momin provided one of her cousin sisters as replacement to Tesbin T. Sangma. This man got replacement for the second time.

From the above examples it is clear that on.songa is not mandatory in the present day Garo society. It depends upon the availability of suitable girl and the consent of the girl.

Garo women in general obey and respect customary laws. Reason for obeying varies from women to women. From their answers to certain questions in this regard we have the following impression:

It is found that all women have respect towards customary rules. 16.17% of the total respondent keep on obeying customary laws since those have been traditionally obeyed from generation to generation. They do not want to disregard those. 37.35% of them say that it their social duty to show respect and obedience to the customary laws. It is their strong feeling that disrespect to the customary laws may lead to social disorder. 3.52% of them are happy with customary laws and believe that violation will cause unhappiness. Only 6 (1.76%) respondents regard customs as unique to which all should show allegiance.

Recently Garo Hills Autonomous District Council has taken initiative to give a new shape of the Garo Customary Laws to cope up with the changing circumstances. The District Council has appointed Committee for codification of Garo Customary Laws. Some educated women is also included in the Codification Committee. Dr. Milton S. Sangma is the President of the Committee. The Committee tries to amend Garo customary laws to cope up with the changing circumstance. The
Committee has submitted its report to the District Council in the year 2008. The District Council is yet to review the report of the Committee. In this connection the committee takes views and collected informations from legal practitioners, Laskers, Sardars, Nokmas, different NGOs and learned persons from all walks of life.

**Awareness towards Violence against Women:**

The Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December, 1993. As define in the Declaration violence against women, will include “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in Public or Private life”. 77 Throughout the history women have been considered as weaker sex world over which push them to a disadvantageous position. Crime against women becomes a world wide phenomenon. As a matter of fact problem of violence against women is neither something new nor is the problem of a particular society. It is almost universal. In some way or other it takes place in every society. Women in Indian society have also been victims of violence since beginning of social life. According to National Crime Reports Bureau, 1,50,000 crimes against women are registered annually of which nearly 50,000 are related to domestic violence. 78 Because of the general acceptance of male superiority in the society, the violence against women is not often considered as violence.

In Meghalaya, statistics in terms of crime against women, viz., rape, molestation and abduction are also on the rise when we
compare data for the years 1991 and 1998. In 1991 there are 27 cases of rape, 17 cases of molestation and 5 cases of kidnapping and abduction. In 1998 Meghalaya recorded 42 cases of rape, 12 cases of molestation and 16 cases of kidnapping and abduction (Planning Commission, 2002). Meghalaya also records the highest in domestic violence according to the National Family Health Survey – II, (1998-99).79

Caro society is not an exception in this regard. It is found that Garo women also suffer from domestic violence in spite of having matrilineal social order. 15% of the total respondents face domestic violence in the nature of mental harassment and physical abuse. In this context noted Colonist Patrician Mukhim opines “violence against women is a universal phenomenon which is triggered by modern pressures and pulls and influence of so many factors such as televisual, cable T.V. Phonographic movies and family dynamics. Violence against women which includes both mental and violence (rape, assault etc.) is an assertion of male dominance”.80 The Garo society is however free from the evil practice of dowry which is an important factor that leads to violence against women.

Women in Resubelpara are not found to be very much aware of different Acts which affects women. Few of them know some of the Acts affecting women like Family Court Act (1984). The Divorce Act (1969) and The Maternity Benefit Act (1961). 16 women i.e. 4.71% of the total respondent know about all these three Acts, while bulk of the respondent are not aware of any Acts are in related to women.

In Meghalaya, “Meghalaya State Commission for Women” has been set up to improve the status of women in the state. The Commission has to inquire into unfair practices affecting women and to
matters connected therewith. It has come into effect on 15th October, 2004. 81

From time to time, Meghalaya State Commission for Women use to organize meetings with NGOs to discuss social issues. It also conducts Public Hearing on crime against women and domestic violence. It provides health facilities to women. The Women Commission makes special efforts to create awareness among the women folk in the villages of their rights. The Commission tries to enable the women to attain the goal of gender justice. As a result women have become aware against violence directed to them. On request of Meghalaya State Commission for Women, Government of Meghalaya has recruited more Women Police in the districts to deal with crime against women. Complain cells have been set up in all district.

Seminars were organized by the Commission to create awareness among all sections of the society. For this purpose of social reconstruction cooperation and improvement of NGOs and Church leaders are being sought. The Commission has taken initiative to create awareness in this regard. It encourages the Heads of the villages and NGO's to organize awareness camps on the Rights of Women and to take measures to prevent crimes affecting girls and women folk both in town and villages.82

Smt. Susanna K. Marak, the Chairman of the present Meghalaya State Commission for Women has told that, the Commission could identity some of the problems faced by women in the Garo Hills Districts. Some of the identified problems are unemployment, lack of education, and lack of knowledge on health and hygiene and including sanitation. Marak opines that the practice of some Garo Customary Law
like *On.rika* (replacement of a young girl for deceased wife) which affects the life of young girls. She also informed that Action Plan is being worked out by the Commission in this direction.\(^83\)

**Role of Christianity in Bringing About Cultural Change:**

Christianity has brought about a remarkable change in the entire social life of the Garos. American Baptist Missionaries had peripheral contact with the Garos even before the hills were annexed by the British Colonial rulers. With the establishment of British headquarters at Tura, the Missionaries intensified their activities among the Garos. They were very successful in their Mission. Christianity had brought significant changes in the belief and practices of the Garos. It has greatly influenced the traditional cultural practices of the Garos.

Christians do not build bachelor dormitory. As a result there are no bachelor dormitories in the Christian Garo villages. After being converted to Christianity, Garos give up preparation of rice beer by themselves. Now a day they use to drink foreign liquor or rice beer prepared by the non-Garos. Prior to the conversion to Christianity the Garos used to offer sacrifice to their deities. Offering sacrifice and supplication of the spirits or the deities was a part of traditional village festivals. It was the main attraction of traditional festivals. Music, dancing feasting, merry making etc. were done before and after offering sacrifice. Sacrifice is against the principle of Christianity. These practices are gradually abandoned by the Garos after being converted to Christianity. These activities have been replaced by Church services and prayer meetings. To serve tea to the guests has become a hospitality symbol in place of rice beer.
The non-Christian Garos used to keep provisions for a large area in their households specially for the purpose of serving rice beer to the guest’s relatives at the time various ceremonies associated with birth, marriage and death. But the Christians do not bother to have such space. For them Christianity symbolizes participation in a much larger world than the old one of their relatively isolated villages. Christian Garo use to visit different places of both inside and outside the Garo Hills and become acquainted with the practices of different people. Christianity is equated with modernity as it provides better education and knowledge about the ‘world’. Innovative and ambitious Garos turn to Christianity for the purpose of achieving success and prosperity.84

Christianity has put an end to the practice of polygamy which was prevalent in the traditional Garo society. The Christians are not allowed to have more than one wife. In this regard Burling observes, “Indeed, as far as I can see, Christianity has been directly responsible on for two changes to the kinship system; it brought an abrupt end to polygamy, and the older practice of bride groom capture was immediately abandoned”.85 In the traditional Garo society widowed mother-in-law is considered as the other wife by the resident son-in-law.86 But among the Christian Garos resident son-in-law can not consider his widowed mother in law as his wife. Rather, he has to take care of her as mother-in-law. The status of the widowed mother in law is maintained in the Christian society. To take care of people in this old age is an important feature of the Christian households.

The Christian way of negotiation for a marriage is also different from that of the non-Christian Garos. The Christian Garos do
not practice the game at bride groom capture. They prefer a peaceful negotiation and give due regards to mutual consent of spouses. Although they still continue to practice traditional system of selection of heiress from her father lineage, they are not very strict in this regard. Girls are allowed to marry according to their own choice. Even the heiress daughter is not prevented from marrying a boy outside her father lineage. The Christianity has given greater liberty to the girls in this regard.

The 'do.sia' marriage is no longer practiced in its traditional style among the Garos. A Garo man and a woman irrespective of their being converted or not converted can live as husband and wife without any resistance from the society or from the respective family members. After living together for a certain length of time will be accepted as husband and wife by the society even without any formal marriage. Their children will be treated at par with the children born to parents married formally according to traditional customs.

Changes are also seen in Garo culture. The traditional house structure is being replaced with new type of houses. The Garos build their houses on piles and mostly on slopes of hills. One end of the house is founded on the ground, while the other end of the house is generally about 10 ft. to 15 ft. height. The posts used vary from 4 ins. to 6 ins. in diameter. On the top of the floor posts cross-beams are placed, over these a layer of whole bamboos and lastly, covering of rough bamboo matting. The walls are made of the same matting, and the roof is a substantial covering of thatching grass. In case of non-availability of thatching grass, bamboo leaves or leaves of a species of cane are used.87 Nowadays the architectural design is influenced by houses constructed in plains and
metropolitan cities. Some of the well to do families has now constructed their houses with brick and cement instead of bamboo and timber. They have now replaced their bamboo furniture by wooden furniture and plastic furniture.

They have adopted new mode of cooking and started to have new kinds of food items. Changes have also taken place in their way of amusements.

The staple food of the Garos is rice. They rear pigs, fowls, ducks, cows etc. They use to eat the meat of both wild and domesticated animals. Dry fish which the Garos call 'Nakam' is their favourite food. Normally they do not use oil for cooking. Instead they used a kind of alkaline which they obtained by burning dry pieces of plantain trunks and roots. Now a days most of the urban people used soda instead of home made alkaline.

Garoś have their own traditional musical instruments like O-Dama, Kram, Nadi, Nagra etc. O Dama is a 4 to 5 ft. long narrow drum made of wood. It is tickest at the centre, and tapering down towards both end, The Kram is also a wooden drum larger than the dama. Both open ends of the Kram is covered with cowhide. One end of the Kram is quite large and tapers down to a much smaller size at the other end, The Nadi is a small wooden drum about 12 inches in diameter and 6 inches deep which serves as an accompaniment for the Kram, the Nagra is also a large drum. It is made of a big earthen pot and is covered with cowhide (skin). It was usually played in order to assemble the people to the Nokma's house when he gives an entertainment. But in the present day Garo society these instruments have lost their earlier importance. Many
musical instruments have been replaced by new instruments of western style have also been seen in their dress pattern.

Changes have also been seen in their dress pattern. The young boys and girls like to put modern dresses instead of their traditional dresses. The Garos in the past could spun cotton and weave cloth by themselves. They used belt-loom for weaving. They used to wore blue cloth designed with red and while stripes. This was used both as skirts for women and as loom cloth for men.\textsuperscript{90} The belt looms have now been replaced with treadle operated looms. However, uses of looms are very limited now-a-days. Mill made cloth becomes more popular among them as these are easily available in the market. The women now use to wear ‘Dakmanda’ (like Assamese mekhal) instead of traditional skirts. The ‘Dakmanda’ is like Assamese mekhal tucked in at the waist which falls below the ankles. Some Garo women use a ‘chadar’ over the ‘dakmanda’ to cover the upper part of the body. Their ‘dakmanda’ and ‘chadar’ resemble the traditional Assamese dress called ‘Mekhala chador’ use by the women of the Bramaputra valley. The Garo women living in the plain areas bordering Assam also use to wear such mekhal chador type dresses. The man living particularly in the interior villages still continue to wear the short lion cloth. But short pants are also popular among some of them. Cotton T-shirts of modern style are also used by both men and women.

**Role of Urbanization in bringing changes among the Garos:**

Urbanization is another important factor, which has brought changes into the Garo matrilineal set-up. The spread of urbanization has given rise to more chances to intermingling with people of different
communities and thus lead to the adaptation of different cultural traits among them. This process has also altered their perception of matrilineal culture.

Educated boys prefer to migrate to the urban and the suburban areas offer their marriage. It becomes a common practice that those who work in different positions and places in urban areas prefer to stay in their working place rather than in their in-laws residence. Such couples use to purchase land, build houses of their own and thus acquire individual property. In many cases such couples settle down in place quite distant from their parental village.

Even girls also prefer to set up neo-local family. Such families stay separately from the parents in-laws. It is the mutual understanding between the husband and wife which has given rise to more neo-local families. Another cause for opting neo-local family style is financial problem. It has been found that except the rich families, other families of the village could not afford to have many members in a single household. Thus, due to this problem couples newly married have to stay separately. Ancestral property of average Garo family is so small in amount and quantity that parents cannot afford to divide property among all the daughters. Whatever they have in the form of land or any other goods, generally go to the heiress daughter. The other daughters have to go away from their parental house and construct separate household. One more cause which has contributed towards their option of neo-local family is the influence of similar urban practice. Like the urbanities, rural people found the neo-local small family structure less problematic and at the same time simple and convenient.
The advent of Christianity the spread of modern education, growth of urbanization and modernization the development of science and technology have brought changes into the Garo society; a society traditionally conservative and rigid gradually becomes flexible. Education and holding of job by Garo women have raised their position in the family. Mahari has also lost its earlier authority and importance. Mahari no longer remains as a prime decision making body in the social life of the Garos. Now-a-days educated Garo women can take individual decision in buying and selling of private property, in settling marriages of their daughters etc. Garo women can now take part equally with man in different walks of life. Now the Garo girls can enjoy more liberty than their sisters of 19th century, particularly in respect of selection of life partners. The system of inheritance of property by the Garo women has enabled them to great extent to achieve better status in the family.

As held by Dr. Julias R. Marak, the status of women in Garo matrilineal society is very high. According to him, Garo women do not suffer from domestic violence like the women of patriarchal societies. The society is free from dowry and the female are well protected by their lineage members specially by their chras. Prof. Milton S. Sangma also the same view. He opines that women status in present day Garo society is very high. He also maintains that chras are very powerful and they are the final decision makers. But when they take the decision, opinion of the principal female of the household is always taken. He also viewed out that in the villages and in the uneducated families women are very submissive. But in the educated families and in the urban areas both husband and wife are equal.
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