

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES OF THE RABHAS AND GAROS

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO GAUHATI UNIVERSITY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE
DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORE RESEARCH
IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS**



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2013

লোক সংস্কৃতি গৱেষণা বিভাগ
গুৱাহাটী বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়
গোপীনাথ বৰদলৈ নগৰ, গুৱাহাটী - ১৪
ফোন : ০৩৬১-২৫৭০৬৭২



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Certified that the thesis "**REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES OF THE RABHAS AND GAROS**" is an authentic record of research carried out by Ms. Gargee Chakraborty for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Gauhati University under my supervision and guidance. The thesis has not been submitted to any university / institution for the award of any degree / diploma.

The candidate has complied with all the requirements for submission of Ph.D. thesis as laid down in the regulations of Gauhati University.

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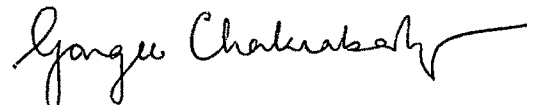
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DECLARATION

I, Ms. Gargee Chakraborty hereby declare that the thesis titled ***“REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES OF THE RABHAS AND GAROS”*** is an original research work undertaken by me under the supervision of Dr. Anil Boro, Reader, Dept. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University. This thesis has not been submitted to any other university or institution for any degree or diploma.

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(Gargee Chakraborty)

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis is based on the field work carried out during the period between 2009-2012, in the districts of Kamrup (Rural and Metro) and Goalpara. The aim of the study is to examine women and their representation in folktales in the context of the two tribes-the Garos and the Rabhas. The field work was carried out in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara as a PhD candidate in the Dept. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University.

The study was undertaken under the supervision of Dr. Anil Boro who has inspired me and guided me all throughout the entire work without whom this work would not have been completed. His personal care, moral support has always inspired me to complete the study. I take this opportunity to acknowledge my sincerest thanks and gratitude to him.

I would also like to offer my sincerest thanks and indebtedness to Dr. K.K. Bhattacharjee, Head, Dept. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University who too has taken personal care and guided me from time to time in my work. I would like to acknowledge the staff of the dept. of Folklore research for their help and support.

While undertaking a research various people in one way or the other are associated. Although they remain behind the scene, without their help, active interest and blessings one can't complete a study. Here I would like to thank Dr. Ranjan Bhuyan who encouraged and helped me to take the first step in my research initiative.

Primary data collection is one of the essential steps of a research process. Data is generated through proper fieldwork. In this endeavour various persons helped me providing necessary information, accompanying me in my field work, mediating and spending their precious time. To start with I must thank my friend and colleague Adward Steady Sangma who gave his time to accompany me during my field visit among Garo people. Next I must also offer my sincerest gratitude to Prof. Dhaneswar Kalita, Mirza for his help in collecting data. My

sincere thanks goes to Prof. Akhil Das, Prof. Ananya Baruah, Pankaj Rabha, Bhubin Rabha, Karab Ch. Rabha, Holdesh N.Sangma for their help and support in my field work.

I am indebted to UGC for providing me the study leave under FDP to pursue my research work.

My thanks go to Hemanga for the final computer work.

Finally last but not the least I would like to thank my mother Mrs. Amita Chakraborty, my husband Mr. Hrishikesh Bharadwaj, my father-in-law Dr. Nagendra Nath Sarma for their constant co operation and support.

Date :

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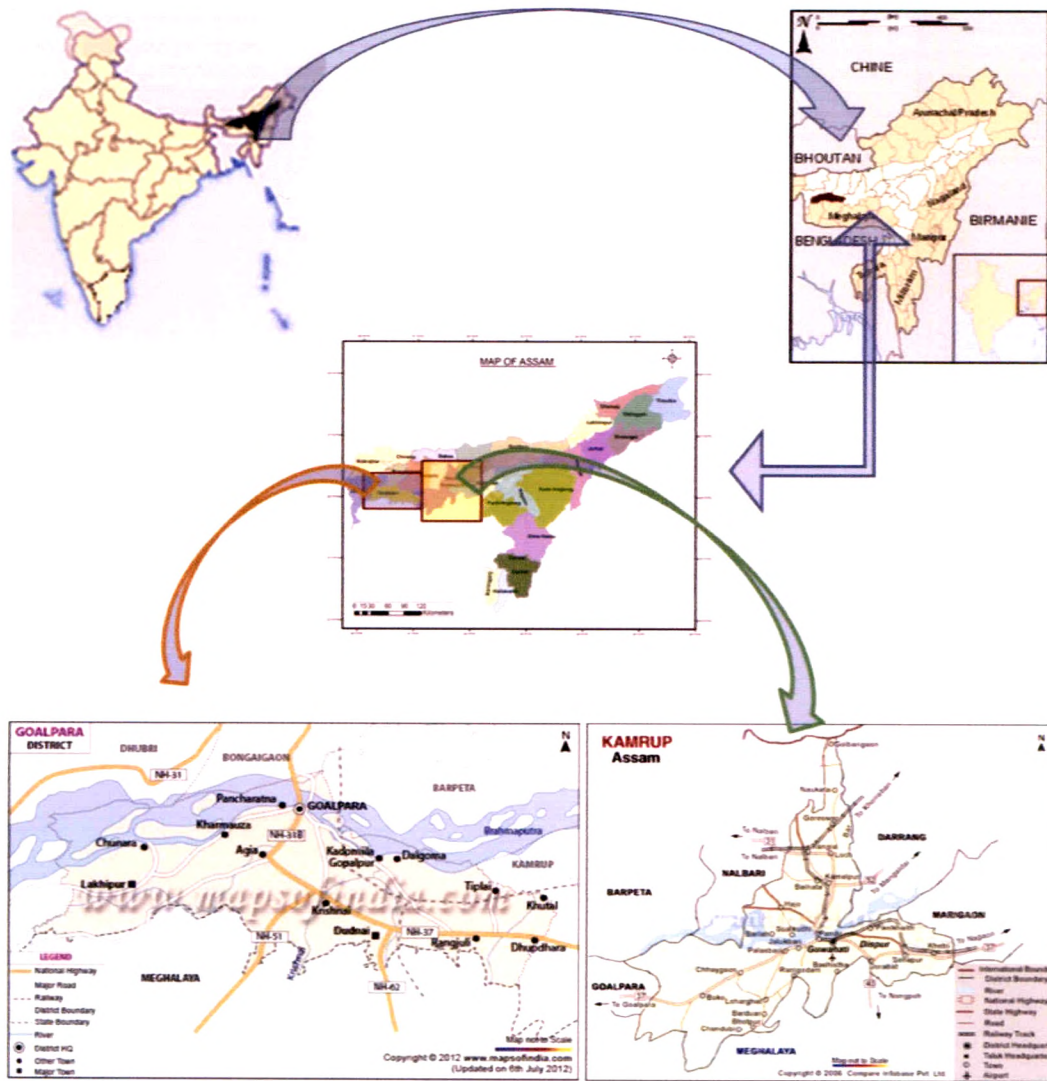


Figure 1: Location of Goalpara and Kamrup District

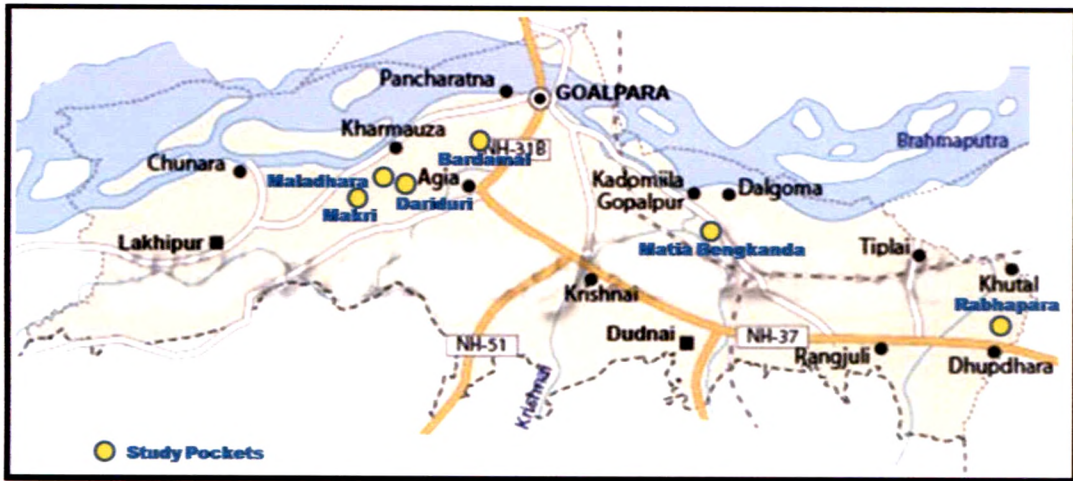


Figure 2: Goalpara District: Study Pockets

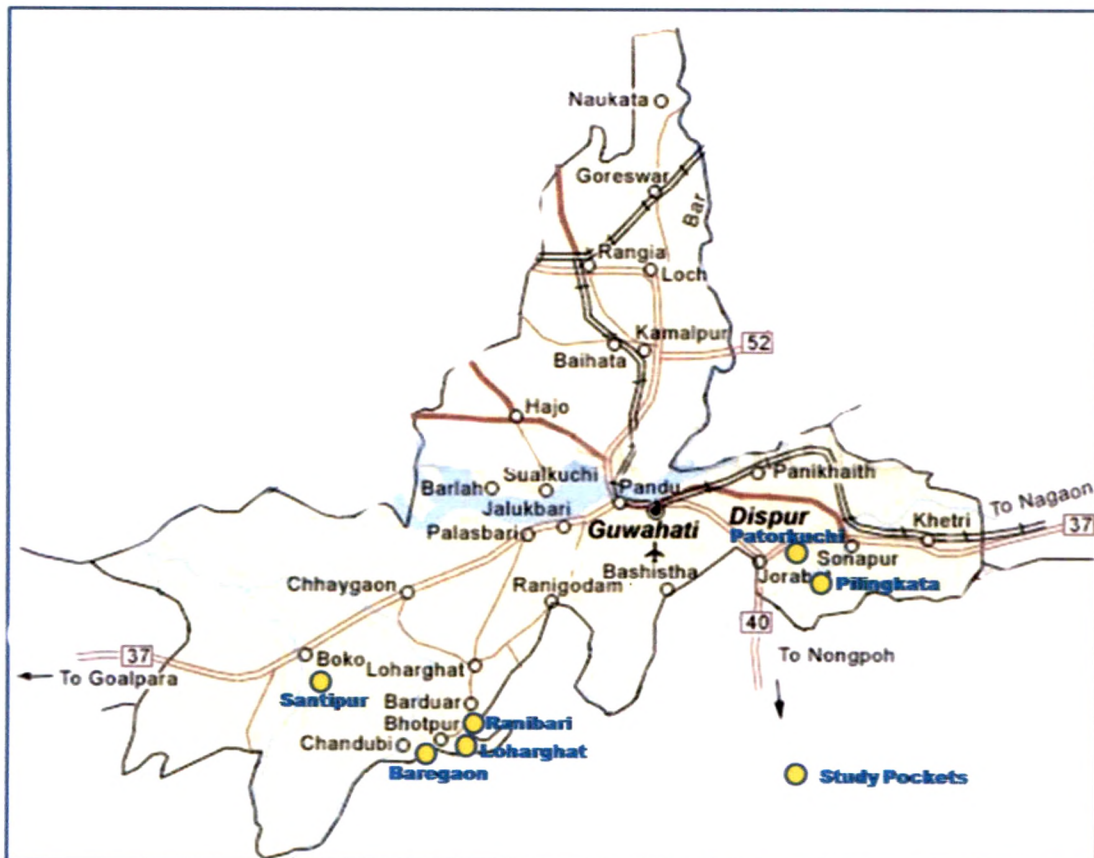


Figure 3: Kamrup District: Study Pockets

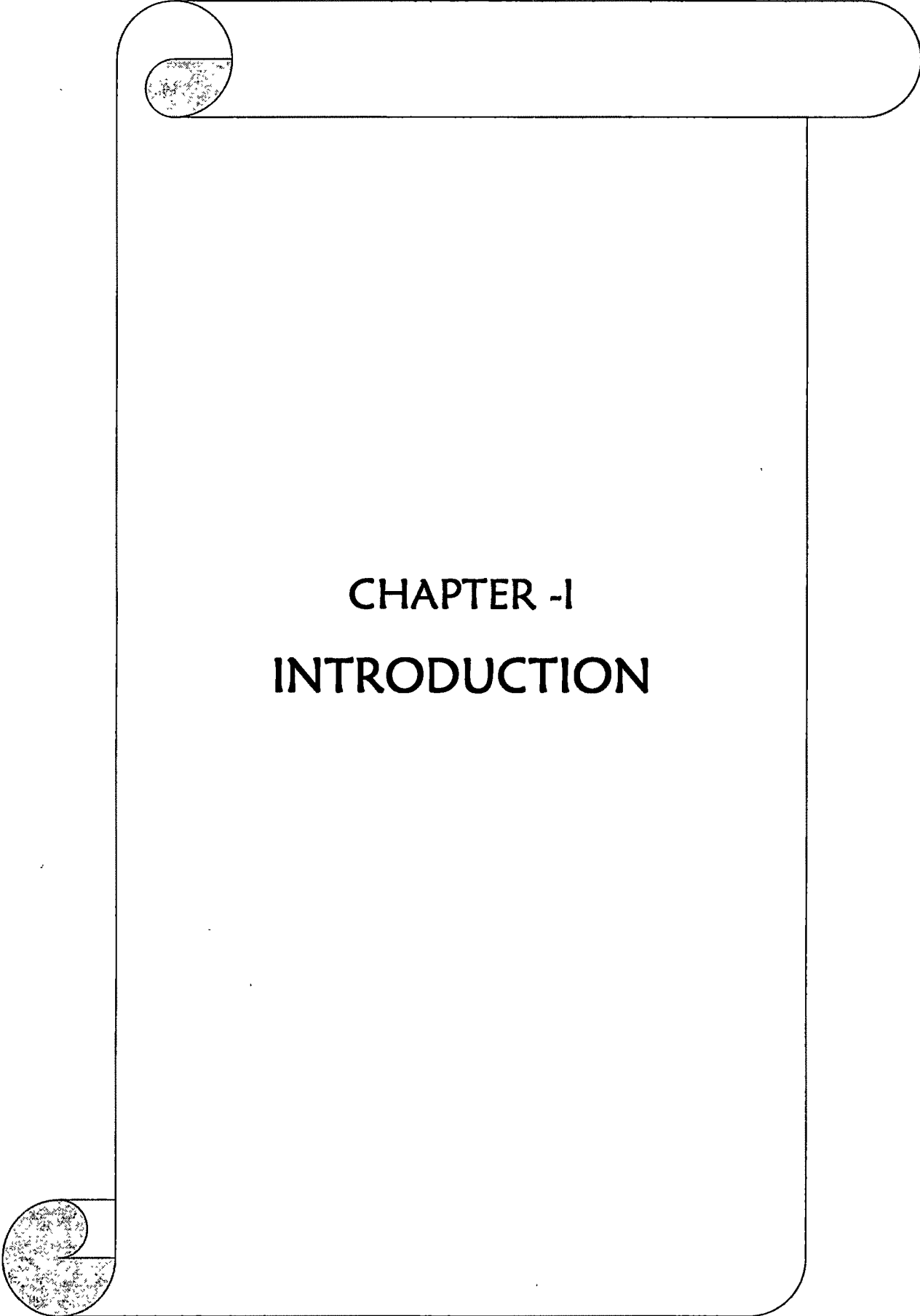
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CHAPTER -I
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The ethnic situation in the North-Eastern states of India is a unique one. It is generally believed that the status of women in North Eastern region is slightly different in comparison to those living in the rest of the country. For example, we can see the mobility of women in Assam is far higher. This may be due to factors like absence of purdah, absence of occupational caste groups resulting in caste flexibility and a long standing influence of tribal work pattern where village economy revolves largely on women's labour and female entrepreneurship. Having said this, I do not mean that women in Assam are on an equal footing with men. Thus my attempt here is to see how women are represented in the folktales of the two tribes of Assam-the Rabhas and the Garos. To understand woman's status, folktales can give us a new perspective because in traditional societies women are seen as the tradition bearers and instruments in the cultural continuum and folktales are mostly passed from one generation to another through women and while telling and retelling of folktales society's views including women's own opinion get incorporated in them. Position of women as reflected in folktales is worth studying in the context that the agony and suffering, problems and bold thoughts and protests, weaknesses and qualities, expectations, hopes and fears of women get reflected in the folktales in some form or the other.

1.1 AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to find how women in the tribes like Rabhas and Garos were represented through a content analysis of their own folktales. Folk literature reflects the social and cultural life of a community. Role played by women in these two cultures is discussed, thereby the exploration of the society, where women form an integral part and how women are represented in the tales. The songs and tales are transmitted from generation to generation through oral

tradition, which is mainly preserved by women folk of any society. It was the women who composed and sung the folk-songs and narrated the folktales mostly in the private domain.

1.2 LAND AND THE PEOPLE OF THE STUDY AREA

For the purpose of the study the folktales of the Rabhas and the Garos have been selected. My area of concentration has been Kamrup (Both Rural and Metro) and Goalpara, districts where these two tribes have numerically better strength than the other districts of Assam. According to census Report (2001) the percentage of Garos in the Goalpara district is higher at 7.8% (64,114) when compared to 0.5% (1,43,257) Garo population in the state. Similarly the percentage of Rabhas is 6.8% (56,255) in the district against the overall 0.5% (1,30,875) in the state. In the district of Kamrup the Garo population is 1.1% (28,699) as against the 0.5 % (1, 43,257) in the state whereas the population of Rabhas is 0.9 % (22,492) as against 0.5% (130,875) overall Rabha population in Assam.

In the study area the villages are mostly backward and deprived of advanced transportation and communication facilities. Although the people in general are simple, honest and easy going, the majority of them still suffer from superstitions related to witches, incantation, and belief in evil spirit. The prime reason may be the lack of education. Moreover women are at the receiving end of the ill effect of traditional home made liquor.

Pati Rabhas and *Rangdanis* are found to be advanced among the Rabhas. Interestingly, quite a few numbers of followers of *Chaitanya* sect.¹ among the *Rangdani Rabhas* of Bardamal are found.

During the field study it was observed that Garos are mostly controlled by the *Mahari*.² Although a lot of change has occurred in their traditional life, still

-
1. Nital Ch. Rabha, 64 of Village Bardamal, Balijana Block, Dist. Goalpara, a follower of this Vaishnavite cult informed that in their village itself, there are 15 families of this cult. Pankaj Rabha (25) his son added that this section has given up traditional rice-beer and pork. They opted for vegetarian food.
 2. Mahari is the functional unit of Garo Household, consisting of smaller group of kins, closely related by common motherhood to carry out different responsibilities.

everyone stresses the influence of *mahari* in their family and social life. Garos are better educated than the Rabhas in the two districts. This is probably because almost all Garos in these two districts are already Christianized and with the spread of Christianity, education reached even to the most interior Garo villages. Thus there is a shift from traditional life style as we know that Garos used to be shifting cultivators. Now they have opted for permanent settlement although *jhum* cultivation is still in practice.

1.3 ETHNIC SITUATION IN ASSAM

From a social perspective Northeast of which Assam is an integral part is the habitat of diverse ethnic groups. The tribal who constitute a large chunk of its inhabitants are a heterogeneous group, all of them with a rich heritage. So in discussing women's status in the region one has to go beyond its economy to understand its strong tribal culture that has probably influenced even non-tribal societies like *Asomiya* and *Meitei* who like most tribals consider themselves the indigenous people of the region. Women's position in the tribal societies is characterized by socio-economic and political heterogeneity. Disparity in women's status among them arises from their different historical experiences. Most tribal groups of the region are patriarchal. Matriliney prevails among Khasis, Garos and Jaintias of Meghalaya. Although the social system conditions women's status, one can not assert without hesitation that matrilineal set up bestows a higher status on women while their status deteriorates in the patriarchal system. The presence of matrilineal clans in their patriarchal society theoretically provides considerable importance to women among Rabhas in comparison to other tribal women (Bordoloi et al., 1987: 36-39). However one is not certain that the theoretical possibilities offered by it actually translate in to higher position in their society when compared to other tribal and non-tribal groups. Patriarchy is common to most tribes of the region. Inheritance and succession rules follow the male line. Women whether married or unmarried do not have the right to inherit clan property.

The ethnic situation in the seven North Eastern States of India is a unique one. It is generally believed that tribal women of the North East are egalitarian. It

is considered that purdah is not imposed on women. There is no restriction on women's physical movement, nor on food habits or attires, no case of bride burning, no female infanticide, no dowry (instead cases of bride price has been found to be prevalent), no ban on widow's remarriage. Here women seem to enjoy a fairly high status. But reality is of course different. Though status is high compared to their non-tribal counterparts, men in their own society do not treat them as their equal. Image of women in the North Eastern tribal societies is not a bright one as it has been perceived from outside. Earlier many mainstream scholars used to argue that women in NE India enjoy better status than women in mainstream India mainly because of the absence of Hindu caste structure.

1.4 WHY THE TOPIC HAS BEEN SELECTED

While reviewing literature related to folklore and particularly tribal folktales, it came to my notice that not much study has been done on women and their presence in tribal folktales of Assam. We only get stereotyped women as characters of folktales. This study attempts to see how women are represented in folktales of these tribes. Because it is through women that folktales are carried from one generation to another and with it the beliefs, traditional customs of a society are also carried forward.

1.5 SELECTION OF THE TRIBE

This thesis is an attempt to understand representation of women in the tribal societies of Assam; however it is not possible to work among all the tribes. Therefore, two tribes living in southern part of Assam were selected. The reason of selection is that they are neighbouring tribes and one tribe is matrilineal and the other adheres to patrilineal set up. Moreover they have linguistic affinity.

1.6 OBJECTIVES

The present study is carried out keeping the following objectives in mind-

1. Status of women as reflected in the folktales of the Rabhas and Garos,
2. Man-woman relationship as reflected in the folktales of these two communities,
3. Exploration of the society through the eyes of the women,
4. Role played by women in culture of these two communities under study.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The history of our society reveals that for ages and ages women were subjugated by men to secondary status and were suppressed in all walks of life. The patriarchal system of our society compelled women to safeguard the patriarchal values throughout their life. In each of their act and even in their thought, they carry the tremendous tension of men's authority. Expectation from women is the same everywhere in India where society is rigid in maintaining and safeguarding the patriarchy.

Women in the patriarchal set-up are not allowed to think, decide and hold opinion independently even when they can. The present study is an attempt to investigate whether women in tribal communities under study enjoy better status with respect to societal power and position as compared to non-tribal societies. It is envisaged that the findings from this study will generate important information regarding the role and status of women in tribal societies.

1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is focused to have a better understanding of tribal life and the position of women in the tribal societies. Since folktales pass from one place to another, from one generation to another, this gives a clue to understand how women are represented in the society. Since this area is largely ignored, our study gives a different and fresh perspective on the representation of women in folktales and thereby their role, status, and place in the said society.

1.9 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

With the advancement and inroads of electronic media into more and more households even in interior villages, story telling tradition is in transition. Women who are active bearers of these tales and children who form the major chunk of the audience are lured away to the glare of TV sets. Thus story telling as a form of entertainment and education is losing its ground and with it ever decreasing number of story tellers. Gradual disappearance of folktales in oral circulation has limited the scope of the study. The study would have been better

had I been able to meet more storytellers/narrators during my field work. The study could have been more extensive.

1.10 METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary data collected from published sources and primary information gathered from field work. Oral versions of some of the published tales and some new tales not found in the existing published materials have been collected from the field.

a) Sources of data

I have collected a few Rabha and Garo tales in the field. But I mostly depended on published collections of tales for the content analysis giving stress on women characters. Some tales which are used for analysis have more than one version.

b) Methods of data collection

During my field study I used camera and recorder while talking with informants and listening tales. I have followed non-directive interview technique while meeting people and gathering information in the field. Some of the tales are collected in the field from the story tellers in their own languages i.e. the Rabha and the Garo languages and then got it translated through collaborators of the respective languages.

c) Data processing

I. Selection of tales of the two tribes

II. Classification of the selected tales on the basis of

- the presence of women characters in the tales
- the special traits/ features/ qualities/weaknesses/limitations as possessed by women characters in the tales

III. Identification of stereotyped characters

d) Methods of Analysis

In analyzing the tales Folkloristic analysis of tales depicting women is followed. While doing the content analysis of tales I have used perspectives propounded by famous folklorists like A.K Ramanujan who worked on Indian folktales, Zack Zipes, Torbong Lundell, Aarne and Thompson, P.D. Goswami, J.L. Fisher and some others. Feminist thinkers of different schools as for instance Bell Hooks, Gilbert and Gubar, Irigaray and some others' views and observations are also used in interpretation. Kirin Narayan's concept which she used in her "Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon" while dealing with how narrator/informant reacted on particular tale is also taken into account in the course of analysis. In a few tales psychological approach as propounded by Sudhir Kakar is also used for analysis of characters. Analytical clues were taken from the women of both the tribes during my field studies.

1.11 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While dealing with the topic of my study I have gone through related material pertaining to traditional narratives, oral literature, general folklore, concept of feminism and ethnographic study of the tribes to have a comprehensive understanding of the topic and its related areas.

Traditional Narratives

- "The Socio-psychological Analysis of Folktales"(1963)-in this article Fisher deals with the term 'folktale' and classification of folktales into types according to their social function, content, structure, typical audience etc. He maintained that a growing popular interest in local traditional culture included an interest in folktales as a major facet.
- "The Image of the Woman in the African Folktale from the Sub-Saharan Francophone Area"(1976)- Sonia Lee

While discussing faults exhibited by women in folktales, Lee observes that the faults no doubt based on some truth, are likely due to women's subjection by males than lack of intrinsic female character. For

this reason the satire of the tale is concentrated on the moral weaknesses of the women.

- *The Folktale*, (1977)- Stith Thompson

Thompson here deals with most of the great folktales of the world, not only for their own interest as stories, but as elements of culture. He discusses about the nature and form of folktales, gives an account of tales from Ireland to India, and devotes a special section to the North American Indian tales and myths, another to the method of collecting, classifying, studying folktales as a living art. He also discusses a wide range of story motifs and retells their basic patterns.

- *Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North-East India*, (1982)

a) “Women in Assam’s Folklore”- This essay is a rapid survey done by P. Goswami on the folklore material of Assam in order to see how women folk have appeared in the songs, sayings and tales of the land.

b) “Folktales of the Miris”- Here P. Goswami highlighted the similarities between Miri folktales and tales recorded in other parts of Assam, thus showing evidences of give and take among the various sub-cultures of the state. This fact is observed in my study too as some Rabha tales are also found in Assamese and is equally popular.

- *The European Folktale*, (1986)-Max Lüthi

Max Lüthi’s *The European Folktale* has been regarded as a classic, a definitive statement about the nature, style and form of the folktale genre in its European variety. Here Lüthi attempted to identify what makes the folktale a folktale (page 3). He offers ‘ a sort of phenomenology of folk narrative as we find it in Europe...a literary interpretation of the folktale whose goal (is) to establish the essential laws of the genre(page107).yet he has not confined himself to form alone. Instead Lüthi finds evidence of these laws in the ‘formal traits’ or ‘stylistic features’ of the folktale. Lüthi here developed descriptive concepts of analysis that enable us to continue our explorations into the essential laws of the folktale.

- *Oppositional Practices in Women's Traditional Narratives* (1987) - Marie Maclean.

This article points to the observation of Jacob Grimm where he speaks of "a vast number of stories and customs handed down through lengthened periods from father to son", where he simply ignores the fact that at least 80% of the tales were collected from female informants. Folktales have been attacked as escapist fantasies, as a basic reinforcement of conservative social structures and of patriarchal values.

- *Folktales and Society-Storytelling in a Hungarian Peasant Community* (1989) – Linda Dégh

Dégh's book is a richly informative ethnographic study of the role of storytelling and storyteller in a Szekler community in Hungarian Transylvania. The emphasis in this book is on the function of the tale repertoire in daily life and on the personalities of the narrators rather than on the tale texts.

- "Folktale Heroines and the Type and Motif Indexes", (1993)-

In this article Torborg Lundell observed that model for female conduct reflected in folktales over a wide geographical area is far from confined to the submissive beauty promoted by popularization of selected material. Here the writer also dealt in with the concept of 'helper' in the folktale world. It was pointed out that there seems to be different standards for evaluating behaviour of women and men and in some labeling male is given credit instead of female in the title.

- *Folktales from India*, (1994)- Introduction by A. K. Ramanujan

Ramanujan maintained in *Folktales from India*, that wherever people live, folklore grows; new jokes, proverbs, rhymes, tales and songs circulate in the oral tradition. Both public culture and domestic culture cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the folk idiom. He pointed that in a folktale that goes on changing from letter to letter, the structure of the tale may remain constant while all the cultural values

change. Instead of arranging the tales according to some classificatory scheme (eg. Romantic tales, tales of magic etc), Ramanujan arranged tales in this book in eleven cycles or sessions, each consisting of 8 to 11 tales.

He concluded by mentioning one or two other aspects of the folktales such as special phrases found in folktales as characteristic endings in folktales of many languages.

- *From Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon*, (1997) (Himalayan Foot Hill Folktales, Kirin Narayan, in collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood)-

This is a collection of stories narrated by Urmilaji to Kirin Narayan. The stories are associated with women's rituals as representing a 'Kangra women's point of view', but the emphasis here is on upper caste Women's traditions. In the stories performing rituals differentiate observant and fortunate women from non-observant and unremarkable women or men. There are certainly sons, husbands, brothers, fathers, father-in-laws and saintly men in these stories but all these men tend to play out the scripts determined by women's pious actions.

- *Folklore and its Motifs in Modern Literature* (1998)–Dr. Kishore Jadav

Here Dr. Jadav traced the growth of folkloristic studies, focusing on the scholarly works done in Asia, particularly in India.

- *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, (1999) edited by Vinay Dharwadker-

In these essays Ramanujan wanted to bring the best of western theorizing to bear on Indian folktales and also the best of Indian storytelling to the attention of international folklorists. He did more than simply serve as a two way translator because in the process he proposed innovations in the very western theories he originally hoped to apply to Indian material.

- *The Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale*: Here A.K. Ramanujan presents a story about a woman, told by women in the Kannada speaking areas of South India.

Then he offered a reading of it for discussion and suggested certain characteristics of the genre of women-centered tales.

- *Feminist Elements in Marathi Folk Literature*, (2001) (from Indian folklore: edited by Indira Goswami and Prakash Pattanayak) - In this article Lalita Mirajkar tried to explore the elements of feminism which try to identify women as human beings and try to fight for the cause of women with the help of some Marathi folk songs and tales.
- “*Women in Assamese Folktales*” 2008-Manashi Bora analyses here the gender roles played out in the Assamese folktales and through this an idea of the status of women in Assamese society can be made.
- “*Pond- Women Revelations: The Subaltern Registers in Maithil Women’s Expressive Forms*” (2008) – Coralynn V. Davis.

The writer observed that women’s folklore is thematically centered on issues of intimacy, family relations and household prosperity whereas men’s folklore emphasizes broad political themes.

- “*Re-visioning Gendered Folktales in Novels by Mia Yun and Nora Okja Keller*”(2009)-Sung –Ae Lee

This article is concerned with the relationship of the folktales to the narratives within which they are embedded, and some of the functions of retelling and reinterpreting, particularly the role of traditional stories in shaping possibilities of meaning for the lives of the principal characters.

- “*Folktale*” (2009)-Cristina Bacchilega (from Encyclopedia of Women’s Folklore and Folk life)
- Here Bacchilega started with defining ‘folktale’ and how it is different from myth and legend. She also dealt in with different sub genres of folktales. While concentrating on its background history, she discussed about feminist scholarship that has played a crucial role in the development of folktales and the study of role of gender in the teller and the audience of folktales. She summed up the discussion by saying that women have much to say and much at stake both in the reevaluation of

“old wives tales” and in the ever-multiplying transformations of the genre.

Gender and Folklore

- *Folklore and Gender* (1999)(edited by, Lalita Handoo and Ruth B. Bottigheimer)-
 - a. *Women in Indian Folktales*- In this paper K.R. Sandhya Reddy focused on Kannada folktales and her analysis developed on the following three levels
 - i. Women narrators and tales they tell.
 - ii. Depiction of women in the tales, and
 - iii. The inter-relationship of tales and the culture in which they are told.
 - b. *Construction of Gender and Kinship in Assamese Folktales*- In this paper Dr. Kishore Bhattacharjee has analyzed Assamese folktales, particularly those tales reflecting gender relations.
- *Understanding Gender* (2000) - Kamla Bhasin here lucidly discusses on the concept of ‘gender’ in feminist discourse and deals with the questions like the relationship between ‘gender’ and ‘woman’; the difference between “women and development”; “gender and patriarchy”; and between gender, caste and class.
- “*The Discourse of Gender: Power and Practice in Folklore as Discourse*” 2000 (in *Theoretical Essays in Indian Folklore*) - Lalita Handoo.

Handoo observes that gender disparity is culturally maintained, learned and internalized in practice both through cultural concepts and discourse, verbal and non-verbal. Language being a product of culture and the only means of verbal communication, not only reflects the socio-cultural structure of the society, but also reinforces its ideological practices in various ways. System of language, at every level, projects

sexist bias. Speakers, narrators, writers actively construct the inequality that exists between sexes in society, consciously or unconsciously. Patriarchal worldview of a culture is reflected in the attitudes and language behaviour of its speakers, its social practices and discourse, which results in male activities being evaluated positively and female activities negatively.

- “*The Gender of the Trick-Female Tricksters and Male Narrators*” (2001)-Margaret A. Mills

Western theories of myth (Radin, Babcock-Abrahams) have defined the trickster as a particularly complex and ambivalent mythological figure involved with creative cosmological events and with mythical moments when the order of things, physical or social, is undergoing transformation. Tricksters in folktales are akin to but not identical with the mythological forms. While one prominent feature of the trickster’s personality is gender ambiguity, the trickster is almost always conceived in western comparative theory as a male who can transfer or disguise himself as female, usually comical and highly disorderly results. These theories do not adequately address the very rich topic of female tricksters in Middle Eastern popular literature and folklore genres. Mills here compares two female trickster tales performed by a single adult male narrator in Heart, Afghanistan, particularly the portrayal of female agency by a male speaker, with reference to theories of the trickster and of gender centeredness in texts.

- *Gender and Social Movements* (2003)- M.Bahati Kuumba

Here author Kuumba maintains that - the development of frameworks and models that better capture the dynamism and multiple levels of gender has been an unfolding process. Understanding gender as a process focuses attention on the dynamic way that gendered patterns and relationships are continually constructed and reconstructed through human interaction.

- *“Towards a Dialectical Model of Family Gender Discourse: Body, Identity and Sexuality”* (2003)-Libby Balter Blume & W.Blume

Here the authors have traced the development in the gender discourse through different standpoints taken by different schools of scholars and also how families can contribute to an understanding of gender and at the same time can encourage divergence from social stereotypes. The article points to the need of a dialectical model representing gender discourse in families. Deconstructing gender theories from a postmodern feminist perspective, the authors discuss agency and context in families' gender discourse.

- *Songs, Stories, Lives- Gendered Dialogues and Cultural Critique*,2003 (edited by Gloria Goodwin Raheja)- The Essays in these volume highlight theoretical and ethnographic issues concerning oral traditions and women's speech in diverse South-Asian communities in northern and southern India and in Nepal, and situated in Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist Milieus.
- *“Gender as a Social Structure: Theory Wrestling with Activism”* (2004)- Barbara J.Risman

In this article the author argues that there is a need to conceptualize gender as a social structure and by doing so we can better analyze the ways in which gender is embedded in the individual, interactional and institutional dimensions of our society.

Oral Literature/folklore and society

- *Ballads and Tales of Assam* ,(1970)- P. Goswami

This is a work of pioneering character, carrying the methods of analysis and indexing of motifs into a study of the old ballads and Märchan of Assam.

- *Folklore and Folklife*, (1978)- Richard M. Dorson

Here Dorson deals with the concepts of folklore and folklife studies, the fields of folklore and folklore studies, the skills of the folklorists, current theories of folklore etc.

- *Bulletin of the Department of Folklore Research-Vol.3, 1994-95.*

This vol. consists of scholarly articles on status of women in plains Tribal societies of Assam, stressing on their tradition and change. Particularly important is Kishore Kr. Bhattacharya's "Studies on Status of Women: A Resume of Anthropological View Points".

- *"Dimensions of Oral Literature Of North East India"1997-98: B. Datta*

Here B. Datta discusses Oral Literature, a component of folklore. The meditating role of folklore, along with the Oral Written connections and commonness of folklore material across cultures is stressed in the article. "Narratives, particularly folktales have been found to be inveterate travelers. It is amazing how folktales have crossed geographical, political, cultural and linguistic boundaries and migrated across continents with the result that the same or exactly similar tales have become integral parts of the cultural heritages of diverse communities in different parts of the world".

- *Theoretical Essays in Indian Folklore, (2000)- J. Handoo*

Essays in this vol. are analytic in nature and examine many theoretical issues in folkloristics and at the same time focus on Indian folklore as an important, shared and dependable source of knowledge. The idea to depart from obsolete and borrowed paradigms and treat Indian folklore and oral tradition as discourse and an important source of alternative knowledge is, perhaps, the main objective of researching and writing these essays.

- *"Folktales: A Tradition , a Culture"(2001)-Santosh Goyal*

Goyal starts with a discussion on folklore and particularly with folktales and its different sub-heads and concluded by stressing that folk literature is the better projection of the social and cultural life of a society.

- *Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife*, (2009)

The Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife is in many ways a pioneering work of scholarship. The four leading overview essays—"Women's Folklore", "Folklore about Women", "Folklore of Subversion" and "Women Folklorists"—represent a broad survey of folklore scholarship about and largely by women. More specifically focused subject entries follow in alphabetical order. The overall tone of the encyclopedia is unabashedly feminist in its perspective. Feminist scholarship has enriched the entire field of folklore, not only in those areas pertaining to women, and it was feminist scholars who first made a concerted effort to turn the field's attention to women's concerns.

Women and Patriarchy

- "*Theories of Patriarchy*"(1981)- Lindsey German

German observed that the common contention to all theories of patriarchy is that male domination has remained the same regardless of other changes in society. More influential are the sorts of argument put across by people like Hartmann, who see capitalism and patriarchy as two different forces that ally against women. Heidi Hartmann defines patriarchy as "a set of social relations between men, which have a material base and which, though hierarchical, establish or credit interdependence or solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women." She further argues that "the material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labour power...(it) does not rest solely on childbearing in the family, but on all the social structures which enable men to control women's labour".

- "*Women's Collectives in Assam-A Short History of their Status and Present Day Realities*" (2002)-Dr. Monisha Behal (*Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast*, edited by Walter Fernandes and Sanjoy Barbora. Publisher: North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati)

Behal maintained that an anthropological analysis of rural women's lives in Assam has indicated instances of greater mobility in their work pattern and social position. An interesting feature of intra-household power nexus in various communities such as the Karbi, Rabha, Bodo kacharis, Misings and the Assamese is the relative autonomy that women enjoy with regard to their incomes. Women earn through pigs, goats, or weaving.

- *Modernization and Women's Status in North East India*, (2002)- a collection

This collection stresses on how modernization and religious changes have resulted in the assertion of patriliney even in matrilineal tribes like the Khasi and Garo and strengthening of patriarchy among most tribes. Some tribes have experienced these processes because of the ongoing attack on their culture and identity as well as migration of non – tribals to their region.

- *Women in Patriarchy-Cross Cultural Readings*,(2005)-Jasbir Jain(ed.)

Jain stresses in the Introduction on the concept of patriarchy and its influence on every field. All marginalized categories whether men or women get caught in its web of authority. The rest of the vol. deals with the myth of patriarchy and the number of affiliations associated with it. The book stresses on the fact that the roots of patriarchy lie in the myths of creation and the religious worlds based on them.

- “*Understanding Patriarchy*”- Suranjita Ray (web)

The write up starts with ‘what is patriarchy?’ She referred to Gerda Lerner in ‘The Creation of Patriarchy’ (1986) where she has argued against looking for one historical moment when patriarchy was established. Despite a common range of themes within feminism, disagreement exists amongst feminist in understanding patriarchy. The author went on to discuss patriarchy quoting different scholars like Michele Barrett, Sylvia Walby, Suma Chitnis, Sharmila Rege, among

others. She noted that feminist historiography made radical breakthroughs in redefining gender and patriarchies in the context of hierarchies of caste, class, community and ethnicity. Therefore it is pertinent to underline several perspectives of feminism for a comprehensive understanding of patriarchy in terms of its origin, characteristics, nature, structure and persistence. She mentioned that feminist theorists generally share four concerns (Jaggar and Rothenberg, 1984 in Mandell, 1995:4) I) they seek to understand the gendered nature of all social and institutional relations which determines who does what for whom, what we are and what we might become ii) gender relations are considered problematic and as related to other inequalities and contradictions in social life. "Family education and welfare, worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure are socially structured through relations of gender, power, class, race and sexuality." iii) gender relations are not viewed as either natural or immutable but as historical and socio-cultural productions, subject to reconstitution. In particular feminist analysis deconstructs errors and myths about women's empirical realities, and constructs theories by and about women. iv) Feminist theories tend to be explicitly political about their advocacy about social change. They challenge the traditional race-class-sexuality-power arrangements which favour men over women, white over non-whites, adults over children and their struggle to embrace inclusivity continues (ibid, 4-5).

To conclude she pointed that feminists provide explanation for a wide range of particular issues and have been enriched by different approaches and perspectives. The feminist movements need to draw on the strength of all feminist theories as each one on its own is incomplete. In fact feminism will survive as long as patriarchy persists.

- "*Disempowered Gender: Status of Women in North-East India*" (2005) - Binayak Dutta The article seeks to interrogate the notion of women empowerment and gender justice that prevails in popular discourse on North East India. While celebration of matriliney in mainstream discourse has led to the construction of such notions, here the author seeks to

question such notions by studying the jural position of women in the region.

Ethnographic Study of the Tribes

- *The Garos* (1975)- Major A. Playfair

Here Playfair gives a detailed description of the origin, affinities, dress, jewellery, weapons, domestic life, occupation, agriculture, houses, villages, musical instruments, crops, hunting, fishing, food, drink, games, dancing, manufactures, laws and customs, marriage, divorce, inheritance, decision of disputes, head hunting, religion etc of the Garos.

- *Glimpses of the Garos* (1982)- P.C. Kar

This book makes a pioneering study of the different aspects of the Garo, a matrilineal tribe in transition of North East India, and provides for a departure from the usual monographic study of a hill community. It covers subjects like social polity, political administrations, educational and literary developments, traditional religion and spread of Christianity, successive searches for self-identity and concludes with a chapter on the changing features of the Garo society.

- *Tribes of Assam-part I* (1987) (ed. Bordoloi et al)

This book contains ethnographic write ups on seven tribal communities -five from the plains, namely Bodo kacharis, Deoris, Lalungs (Tiwas), Mishings and Rabhas and two from the hills, namely Dimasa kacharis and Karbis with sufficient number of plates representing their life and culture.

- *Matriliny to Patriliny-A Study of the Rabha Society* (1989)-Manish Rabha

This book concentrates on the change of culture in a society which is brought about by various factors. When two societies of two cultures come in contact it is expected that the weaker culture will borrow elements from the dominant one. He elaborated on this by citing the

example of the Pati Rabhas, who follow Hinduism to a great extent as a result of the influence of the dominant Assamese culture.

- *Asamar Janajati* (1991)-(ed.) P.C.Bhattacharya

This book consists of scholarly essays written on different social and cultural aspects of the various tribes of Assam, and the rest of North East. The two most important articles are – “Garo” by D.N. Majumdar and “Rabha” by Dr. B.M. Das.

a) “Garo”-D.N. Majumdar

In this article Majumdar gave a brief introduction to the Garos, their origin and ancient history, different sects., *barai*³, their social life, livelihood pattern, religious beliefs and different festivals, judicial system and their language and dialects.

b) “Rabha”-Dr. B.M. Das

Dr. Das stressed that Rabhas form a part of the greater Bodo community and tried to find out its affinities with other tribes of Northeast. He also mentioned the uniqueness of the community and its different sections, population, livelihood mechanism, different Khel and gotra, social structure, marriage system, religious life, popular beliefs, physical features etc.

- *Women in Meghalaya* (1992)(ed. Soumen Sen)

The articles in this collection provide information regarding traditional status and role of women in both the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo societies and place this information in a temporal framework to understand the processes of change.

a) “*Status of Women in Garo Culture*”-Caroline R. Marak

Marak maintained that in the myths women enjoy so much respect that an insult to a woman can cause conflict and war. In legends women

3. A ‘barai’ is alternatively called ‘bar’/ ‘housug’, which is equivalent to ‘gotra’ in Assamese, Tribes Of Assam part-1,p-131

are portrayed as pure, beautiful, brave and noble and faithful wives. In the history of the tribes women figure prominently though they did not assume leadership during their course of wanderings from Tibet to their present homeland. Women are also respected as progenitresses of the clans of the tribe. Though a Garo woman's status is normally expected to be much better than her sisters in patriarchal societies, her position has not been favourably affected by the matrilineal system. She quoted another scholar of repute, D. N. Mazumdar to bring home her point.

- *Asomiya Aru Rabha Samaj-Sanskritir Sarup* (1999)- M.D. Rabha

This book is written by M.D. Rabha on socio-cultural analysis of the Assamese and Rabhas.

- *Rabha Janajati* (2002)- Rajen Rabha

This book gives a glimpse at the social and cultural aspects of the Rabhas.

- *Axamar Janajatiya Sanskriti* (2005)- Dr. U.R. Hakacham

This is a collection of selected articles by Dr. Hakacham on various aspects on folk-culture of the various tribes of North East India in general and Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in particular.

- *Janajati Samaj Sanskriti* (2008)- (ed. Padma Patar)

This collection of articles endeavours to present an authentic write up on vibrant life and culture of the ethnic groups of Assam covering origin of the tribes, historical retrospect, both cultural and religious practices, festivals, languages and dialects, myths and words, typical tribal administrative pattern et al.

- a) "*Garo Janajati Parichay*"- Dr. Bimal Kr. Mazumdar

Here Dr. Mazumdar started the discussion with how the word '*Garo*' came into existence and different viewpoints regarding its origin and creation. He then dealt with its history of migration from the beginning to its present settlement. He observed that there is some

difference between the Hill and plains Garos regarding their physical structure. This happened because of mixing of different species and geographical variations.

- b) “*Rabha Jannogostir Bivinna Upagosti aru Teulokar Samaj Byabastha*”-Dr. Upen Rabha Hakacham

Dr. Hakacham noted here the geographical distribution of the Rabha tribes over different areas. He mentioned the 8 main division of the Rabha sect. and gave a detailed description of different sub tribes (*Khel*) pointing to their uniqueness.

- c) “*Rabha Janagosti: Ek Abalokan*”- Heramba Kr. Rabha

H.K. Rabha started the article with the daily life of the tribe. He continued with life cycle, marriage system and finally their festivals. He concluded with the observation that the name ‘Rabha’ or ‘Raba’ (bring along, *loi ana*) is given to them by Garos.

- *Assamar Janajati Aru Sanskriti* (2011) (ed. Dr. Malina Devi Rabha)

This is a collection of selected articles on tribals of Assam and their culture, particularly the contribution of different tribes in the creation of greater Assamese community.

- a) “*Rabha Janajati: Samikhyatmak Adhyan*”-Mani Rabha

Mani Rabha here talks about the original habitat of the Rabhas and their descent to their recent geographical distribution, referring to different legends.

- b) “*Garo Janajati: Samaj Sanskriti*”- Dr. Pranita Devi

Here Dr. Devi analyzed the matrilineal Garo society. She discussed the concept of Gotra (*chatchi*), Upagotra (*machong*), *Mahari*, *aking*, *Nokma* etc. she also mentioned that in their social life Garos follow the traditional system based on customary laws prevalent in the society.

On Femininism

- *The Second Sex* (1972)-Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir's classic manifesto, *The Second Sex* (1949) provided the theoretical basis for the emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of feminist activism in both Europe and North America. With her famous remark that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', Beauvoir inaugurated social constructionist critique of essentialism that occupied feminist literary theory in the 1980s and 1990s. While her uncompromising rejection of any notion of a female nature or essence finds echoes in the writing of later feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig, and Judith Butler.

- *The Second Sex* is a wide ranging multidisciplinary essay that draws on and critiques history, biology, anthropology, literature, psychoanalysis, Marxism and existentialist philosophy as means of understanding the lived experiences of women. Beauvoir argues that throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men. Because men have imagined women as the 'other', women have been denied subjectivity.

To illustrate her theoretical insights, *The Second Sex* employs a number of different perspectives. In the first part Beauvoir examines woman 'objectively' that is as object of analysis-through a series of cultural lenses. In the second part she examines women 'subjectively' from the perspective of their own lived experience, showing the processes through which women internalize the ideologies of otherness that relegate them to immanence and to the position of being man's Other.

- *The Dialectic of Sex :The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1979)-Shulamith Firestone

Firestone here attempted to take the class analysis one step further to its roots in the biological division of the sexes. Attempts is made to correlate the best of Engels and Marx (the historical materialist approach) with the best of Freud (the understanding of the inner man and woman and what shapes them) to arrive at a solution both political and personal yet grounded in real conditions.

- *Madwoman in the Attic* (2000)-Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* is a landmark of 1970s American feminism. The book represents both the strengths and limitations of that first decade of 'second-wave feminism' (first wave feminism produced the Declaration of Women's Rights of 1848 and culminated in the ultimately successful campaign for female suffrage during the early 20th C.). They have assumed that every woman shares a set of similar experiences and that patriarchy –the male dominated social order-is everywhere essentially the same. These assumptions became problematic later on, and they have been challenged by feminists such as Barbara Smith, Bell Hooks, Gloria Anzaldua and Judith Butler.

In the work Gilbert and Gubar examine the notion that women writers of the 19th Century were confined in their writing to make their female characters either embody the 'angel' or the 'monster'. This struggle stemmed from male writers' tendencies to categorize female characters as either pure, angelic women or rebellious, unkempt madwoman. They stress the importance of killing off both figures because neither are accurate representations of women or of women writers. Instead Gilbert and Gubar claimed that female writers should strive for definition beyond this dichotomy, whose options are limited by a patriarchal point of view.

- *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000)-Bell Hooks

Throughout the book, hooks uses the term white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy as a lens through which to both critique various aspects of American culture and to offer potential solutions to the problems she explores. In the preface to the first edition of the book, hooks discusses the meaning of her title "From Margin to Center"-

'Living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood

both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.’

For any defined group, especially one with any power, influence, or control, there is a center and a margin, where the center has more power, influence or control than the margin. The way to move towards the center is to use those with influence in the community to get at the center.

- “*Luce Irigaray*”- Sarah K. Donovan in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (web:july2, 2005)

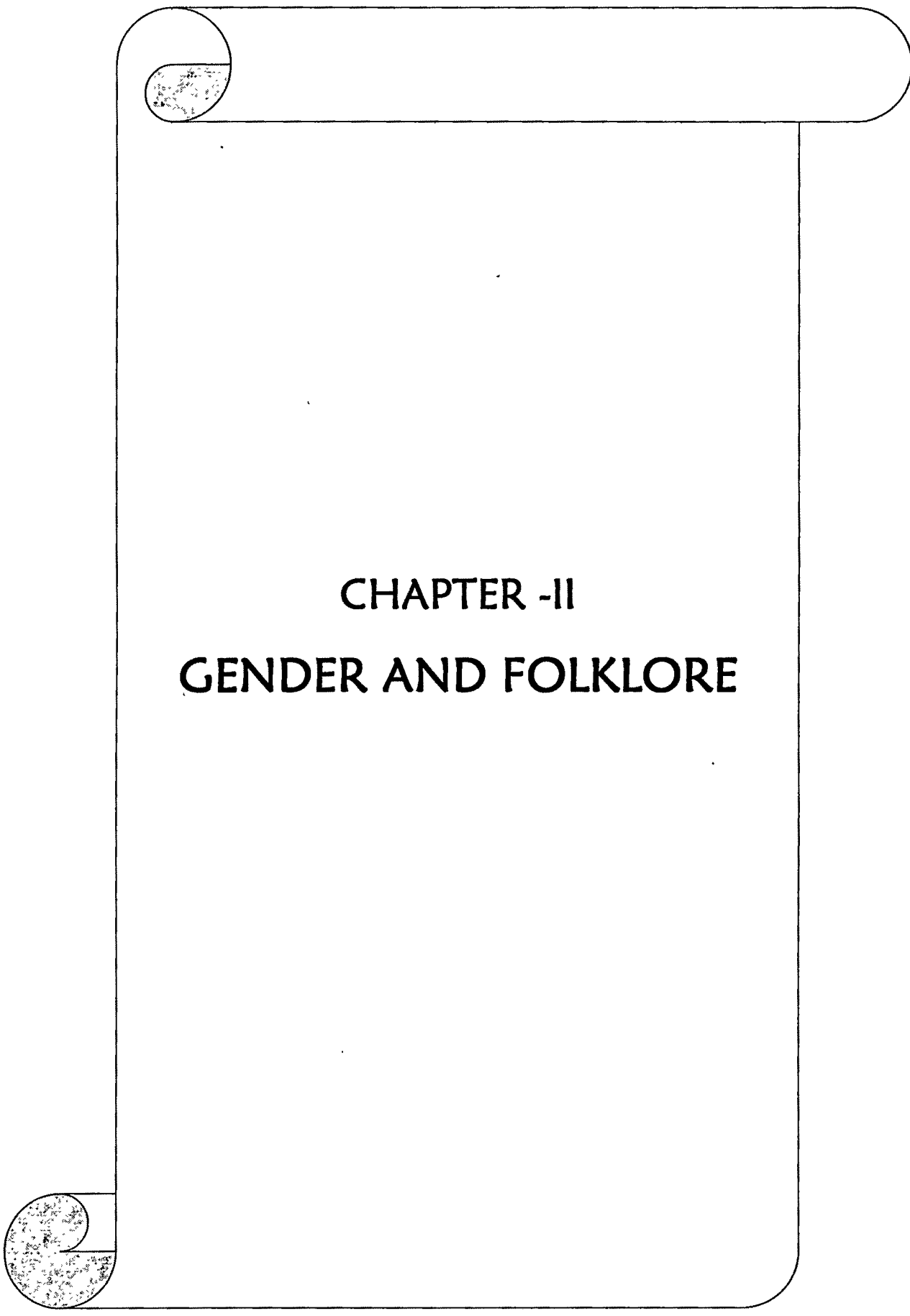
Irigaray is a prominent author in contemporary French feminism and continental philosophy. Irigaray’s departure from Lacan in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, where she critiques the exclusion of women from both philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, earned her recognition as a leading feminist theorist and continental philosopher.

Irigaray alleges that women have been traditionally associated with matter and nature to the expense of a female subject position. While women can become subjects if they assimilate to male subjectivity, a separate subject position for women does not exist.

Irigaray believes that men are subjects and women are ‘the other’ of these subjects (non subjective supporting matter). According to her, the phallus as the master signifier (that can be traced back to male anatomy) is evidence that the symbolic order is constructed and not ahistorical.

- “*Feminist Perspective on the Body-Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*” (web, June 28, 2010)

In developing philosophical frameworks for making sense of sexual difference feminist scholars have provided accounts of the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and identity which are applicable to other aspects of our corporeal existence. The article discusses the historical background, the second sex, sexual difference, maternal body, the semiotic and the abject, the productivity of discourse.

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CHAPTER -II
GENDER AND FOLKLORE

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GENDER AND FOLKLORE

2.1 UNDERSTANDING GENDER

The development of frameworks and models that better capture the dynamism and multiple levels of gender has been an unfolding process. Hess and Ferree (1987) in *Analyzing Gender : A Handbook for Social Science Research*, observed 'the study of men and women as such has moved through three distinct stages in just the past 20 years, from an emphasis on sex differences through preoccupation with sex roles to the centrality of gender' (Hess and Ferree 1987,14). This latter emphasis goes beyond a simple identification of differences between women and men to an analysis of gender as a historically developed social system that operates interactively on social, political, economic and cultural levels. Judith Lorber (1997[1994]) conceptualizes gender as an institution that acts as a key organizing principle in human social life. It not only defines a structured set of relations, statuses, and norms of behaviours, this scheme incorporates (1) process (2) stratification (3) structure.

Lorber (1994) argued that gender is an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations. She further argued that gender difference is primarily a means to justify sexual stratification. Gender is so endemic because unless we see difference, we cannot justify inequality. Lorber provided much cross cultural, literary, and scientific evidence to show that gender difference is socially constructed and yet is universally used to justify stratification. She wrote that 'the continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be subordinate to men as a group (p.33). Martin extended Lorber's (1994) use of the term 'institution' in her argument that gender should be conceptualized as such. She identified the criteria for a social institution as follows- 1) characteristic of groups 2) persists over time and space 3) includes distinct social practices 4) constraints and facilitates behaviour/ action 5) includes expectations, rule/ norms; 6)is constituted and

reconstituted by embodied agents 7) is internalized as identities and selves 8) includes a legitimating ideology 9) is contradictory, rife with conflict 10) changes continuously 11) is organized by and permeated with power 12) is mutually constituted at different levels of analysis.

Understanding gender as a process focuses attention on the dynamic way that gendered patterns and relationship are continually constructed and reconstructed through human interaction. According to Lorber and other scholars who appreciate the dynamism of gender, we are constantly 'doing gender', that is, creating, recreating and reinforcing norms and behaviour associated with gender. We constantly use these gendered categories as basic assumptions in our analysis of the social world, our relationships, and ourselves. It is a process of negotiation in which the boundaries that demarcate the separate 'genders' are contested and reinforced.

Social Stratification has a special place in the study of Indian Society as observed by Dipankar Gupta in *Hierarchy and Difference: An Introduction*. India has long been reckoned as the most stratified of all known societies in human history. Social stratification deals with the ways in which the human population is socially differentiated. As a system of social stratification gender involves the expressions of social inequality and hierarchy associated with men and women in societies. Differences in the allocation of resources, distribution of power and opportunity structures are associated with the construction of gender categories. While the extent of inequality and the relative position of women and men vary from society to society, gender hierarchies that privilege men and masculinity over women and femininity can be found to different degrees, all over the world (Peterson and Runyan 1999).

The concept of gender as we now use, came into common parlance during the early 1970s. It was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competencies, which are then assigned as either "masculine" or "feminine". In human society gender assignments are culturally and socially powerful and produce fundamental differences in world view for

women and men, girls and boys. The purpose of affirming a sex /gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to “domestic” roles.

Though folklore is primarily traditional culture it gets modified along with the progress of society and takes on the colour of the times. The character of a tale at a particular point of time depends no less upon the quality of the narrator and the social changes brought about by external factors than upon its traditional form. Though tales travel and are adopted, some of the tales and motifs are rather fairly old and are closely linked with the modes of life and belief of particular communities. Hence M. J. Herskovits has observed: “a substantial body of folktales is more than the literary expression of a people. It is in a very real sense, their ethnography which if systematized by the student, gives a penetrating picture of their life”.

The structural dimension of gender, on one level, refers to the way in which it organizes social life and divides labor into separate spheres associated with women and men- as for e.g. in some societies the private and public spheres, respectively. Reflecting a gendered division of labor, women and men in a society are not only assigned different roles and responsibilities, these positioning are valued differently and placed in rank order. Gender roles that accompany each status consist of realms of responsibility and sets of expectations of women and men in a society.

Primary attention to gender surfaced in folklore, as in other social sciences and humanities fields not long ago. Margaret Mills, a prominent folklorist has pointed out that it is ironic, if not alarming that the “new perspectives” reformulation of the concept of “the folk” articulated in Dan Ben-Amos’s “Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context”(1972) and Bauman’s “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore”(1972) is striking in “its total non address of gender as a rather persistent and visible cultural resource in folk and popular modes of difference” (Mills, 1993:176). In the 20th century

gender difference is not only acknowledged by scholars but also came out for discussions and became a subject of research. Margaret Mead realized that the difference between the sexes is one important condition upon which mankind has built the many varieties of human culture that gives human beings dignity and stature” (Mead,1949). Simone de Beauvoir was creating the genesis of the view of gender that sex is biological identity, gender is a social construct when she has written her famous statement: “one is not born but rather becomes a woman.....it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...”.(Beauvoir,1972)

The academic study of gender has a relatively short history. Its emergence can be dated as recently as the late 1960s, and its development triggered by second wave of feminism. Along with developing a critique of gender inequalities in both personal relationships and in social positioning (especially economically and politically) second wave feminism began to draw attention to the ways in which academic disciplines and sets of knowledge acted to exclude the experiences, interests and identities of women. For e.g. prior to the 1970s, the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, largely ignored gender. The “people” it studied were mainly men and the topics it focused on were aspects of the social world especially significant for men. Women were almost invisible in pre-1970s gender blind sociology, only featuring in their traditional roles as wives and mothers within families.

Folklore, assigns an independent domain to the women where they enjoy temporal autonomy. In the elite society, knowledge, truth and reality are constructed from the perspective of the dominant gender which is obviously male and female voices are either ignored or given less importance in writing culture. But traditionally, women in India perform the role of the tradition bearers and instrument in the cultural field. The recent discourse on folk narrative research has recognized the gender factor in cultural studies and women’s personal narratives are primary documents for analyzing gender issues. The folk narratives performed and perpetuated by women provide a vital ground to study the female voice in cultures. These personal narratives of women are based on women’s lives and want to analyze the role and meaning of gender in women’s lives and society. These narratives deal with women’s experiences and also present and

interpret women and their concern. Through these stories of their own, women try to negotiate their exceptional gender status throughout their entire life span. Women centered narratives can be defined as those stories which are told by women, owned by women and which are centered on the women. (Ramanujan, in Dharwadker, 1999). While narrating their story, from their own point of view, the stereotype notion of the female in the service of male is questioned and defied in some form or the other. Although in reality, women can do nothing to challenge the male domination and are forced to observe the values and norms of the patriarchal society, but in their own way through their narratives, they try to demolish the boundaries and reduce the gender imbalance and to live imaginatively in their aspired egalitarian society.

2.2 GENDER DISCOURSE AND ROLE OF FAMILY AND SOCIETY

Public discourse on gender is recognized both through formal teaching and informal messages from folk stories, folk songs, riddles and proverbs, conversation with friends etc. Moreover when people talk and interact with different members of the family, they co-construct their own family level gender discourse. While performing regular day-to day works of the family like feeding, bathing, washing, cooking, dressing, clothing – we communicate to infants, children, and adolescents, thereby a set of meanings about appropriate gender behaviour in a particular family is constructed. More often than not parents and children's gendered behaviour are sex typed, or consistent with stereotypes about their biological sex, particularly when parents of young ones converse more to girls than to boys. Many scholars have suggested that the strongest influence on children's gender occurs within families when parents communicate their beliefs – sometimes unconsciously – about sex and gender (Eccles, 1993, Leaper, 2000; Maccoby, 1998). Researchers have demonstrated that family interactions often reveal implicit gender ideologies, scripts, or rituals that prompt them to co-construct shared understandings of the dominant gender discourse in society. (Ben, 1993; Coltrane, 1998). Parents typically scaffold the child's gradual understanding of the world as gendered, either confirming or rejecting the dominant gender discourse (Coltrane and Adams, 1997).

According to Huston and Alvarez (1990) families can contribute to an understanding of gender and at the same time, can encourage divergence from social stereotypes. Sociologists theorizing gender have suggested that culture and society are more powerful explanatory mechanisms than nature and biology. Many traditional sociologists, however, have subscribed implicitly to a model in which the binary categories of male- female and of normal- deviant are assumed to be natural dichotomies upon which most societies are based (Lorber, 1996).

Families undoubtedly have a lot of influence in the creation and transmission of gender. Social constructionists asserts that every family evolves a set of shared assumptions that serve to organize both their family- level discourse and their experience of the larger cultural discourse (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Reiss, 1981). The embodiment of gender norms in some families may not be carried out as per society's expectations, parents generally ask their children to re enact the dominant social discourse in contexts outside home.

Over the past decade, scholars increasingly have used social constructionist approaches to study gender (Fox and Murray, 2000). From a social constructionist perspective, cultural discourse, or the institutional and social practices through which our experience of gender is organized, is seen as constituting gender (Leaper, 2000). In most gender scholarship since the 1970s (Connell, 1999), the term sex is used to refer to physical differentiation (female-male) whereas the term gender is used to refer to social construction (i.e., masculine-feminine). Public discourse on gender is recognizable both in formal teachings and informal messages from folktales, conversation with friends and communication media. At the same time, as individual family members interact with each other they construct their own family level gender discourse.

2.3 UNDERSTANDING FOLKTALE

Cristina Bacchilega, in *Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folk life*, translating the German Volksmärchen (the people's 'little story' or 'news'), opined that the term 'folktale' refers to one of the main prose narrative genres that folklorists study. In contrast to belief narratives like myth and legend, the folktale features fictional characters in culturally meaningful situations, centers

on the ordinary, and is primarily for entertainment. Classified into tale type by the Finn Antti Aarne and the American Stith Thompson in the early 20th C., the folktale groups a number of subgenres, including the animal tale, magic tale, religious tale, joke, and formula tale. But the most prominent is the ‘tale of magic’-also known in English as the ‘wonder tale’ and more commonly as the ‘fairy tale’. Women as characters, tellers, writers, listeners and readers- have historically engaged with and been powerfully associated with this particular kind of folktale, found in both oral and literary traditions.

While for the most part folktales were collected for print in the 19th C. and later they also were part of much older and classic literary texts ranging from the *Panchatantra* and the *Arabian Nights* to Apuleius’s ‘*The Golden Ass*’ and Italian ‘*Pentamerone*’. While ‘fairy tale’ from the French *Conte de fées*, is a misnomer in that fairies are scarce in these stories, magic does play a distinctive part in them. Once upon time signals that a story- some will call it a folktale, others a fairy tale-is coming our way and we would suspend disbelief because whether told or printed, this story will not conform to realism. But the German and French terms, *Volksmärchen* and *Conte de fées*, also point to different genealogies: the folktale is firmly rooted in orality and a group’s tradition and aesthetics, while the fairy tale is identified with printed texts that may or may not emerge from an oral tradition and are often signed by an author when a literary fairy tale has no counterpart in oral tradition, it is not a folktale. However the oral traditions of story telling and the literary traditions of authored texts have been intertwined throughout history, which has made it problematic to draw a sharp distinction between, ‘authentic’ folktales and ‘inauthentic’ literary tales. For example, “Cinderella” is a widely told folktale-classified as ATU 510 by folklorists- with hundreds of versions recorded all over the world, but it has also been part of literature since Giambattista Basile’s 16th C *Pentamerone*. Most modern performances and adaptations of it are based on the French literary version by Charles Perrault. In common usage the boundaries between folktales are often blurred and increasingly in scholarship, that blurring is accepted and results in a fruitful probing of the dynamic relationship between folklore and literature.

While expressions like ‘old wives tales’ and ‘Mother Goose’ point to women as the traditional tellers of folktales, it is through collections edited by men like Charles Perrault in France, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany, Andrew Lang in England and through Walt Disney’s movies that these tales are now best known. Feminist writers and scholars have worked and to expand and transform this limited canon wherein “persecuted heroines” abound by producing more women centered anthologies, recognizing the varied and coded art of women storytellers, rediscovering neglected women writers of fairy tales, re evaluating and revising well known tales and performing and writing new ones. Continuing to serve both normalizing and emancipator social functions and articulating diverse aesthetics, the folktale keeps on performing magic-especially for women-into the 21st century in different media.

Usually set in distant times and generic places, tales of magic most commonly tell the story of a rather unpromising male or female hero who often supported by a magic helper, tackles extraordinary challenges and is rewarded, with royal marriage, fame and fortune. Within these tale worlds, a mix of the supernatural and the ordinary is viewed as normal, and the hero’s magically achieved success coincides with the restoration of a naturalized order. Leaving home is often required for the test to start; at other times something is missing and it must be found. “Departure” and “lack” are two of the narrative “functions” that the formalist Vladimir Propp identified as constitutive of folktale plots. The journey is transformative. Protagonists are often children or young men and women who assume a new social role and sense of being once they have proven themselves.

Symbolism and transformation are key elements that allow for imagining change and for recognizing hidden resources. This paradox works on multiple levels of meaning, from the psychological to the social, so that in different historical or cultural contexts and in specific performances or retellings-a tale may tip toward either subverting or reproducing stock social arrangements; however wonder and convention are both consistently at play.

Folklorists have relied on two important reference tools for the basic study of folktales and more specifically of “tales of magic”. The Aarne-Thompson (AT) *Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (1910; 1928; and 1961) catalogued Indo-European folktales based on plot, identified tales of magic as tale types AT 300-749. It was revised in 2004 into the more comprehensive *Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, edited by Hans-Jörg Uther (ATU). Stith Thompson’s six-volume *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1932-1936; sec. edition 1955-1958), identified small but significant narrative units recurring in folklore and across tale types. While specific categories and headings for tale types and motifs have been criticized by women scholars as embodying a male view of the world, useful regional and national indexes for tale types and motifs have since appeared.

Starting in the 19th C, the collection, study and classification of folktales dominated European folkloristics for a long time. Scholars have persuasively shown how this interest in folktales- of which the collection *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (Children’s and Household tale, 1812, 1815) by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm is a foremost example- was tied to the rise of nationalism, the establishment of bourgeois values, the increasing domestication of women, and the production of children. Whether studying multiple versions of a tale type or a range of folk and literary tales in a specific context, scholars of folktales in the 1970s became increasingly attentive to their variable social and ideological functions.

Feminist scholarship has played an important part in this development. Scholars of folktales and fairy tales have also given much consideration to the role of gender in both the tellers and the audience of folktales. When 19th C. male scholars collected oral tales from women, these tellers were primarily seen as bearers of a tradition, not of knowledge. Their ‘uneducated’ words were then edited and interpreted within an aesthetics and narrative of history that demanded the ‘disenchantment of the world’ for the sake of modernity. The confinement of “old wives’ tales” to the pre modern meant that they held a privileged spot as records of the past but were nevertheless trivialized and othered.

The sexual politics of folk and fairy tales as well as their representations of gender will continue to surprise as such narratives are still emerging in new contexts and media, and our knowledge of oral and literary traditions- esp. when it comes to women's is limited. As narratives characterized by "pleasure in the fantastic" and "curiosity about the real" (Warner 1994: xx), folk and fairy tales have over the centuries and in different social contexts offered an imaginative outlet for desire while maintaining a strong grip on ordinary social life. Women have much to say and much at stake both in the re-evaluation of "old wives tales" and in the ever-multiplying transformation of the genre.

Ramanujan had a keen interest in the folktale as a genre, he saw folktale as a whole, as a fully formed unit, beyond the motifs and (Proppian) moves. But Ramanujan did not seek the performance context of tales and worked almost exclusively on a textual level. Ramanujan in his article "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale" observed that Indian folktales told around the house have usually animals, men, women and couples as central characters. There may be other secondary characters like supernatural beings, both divine and demonic, but they are not the focus of domestic oral tales.

2.4 FOLKTALES: FORM AND NATURE

We know that folktales are popular and anonymous. Folktales unite the miraculous with the natural, the near with the far, and the ordinary with the incomprehensible in a completely natural way. Max Lüthi in his *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* wrote elaborately on folktales and its form and nature. He observed that the secret power of folktale lies not in the motifs it employs but in the manner in which it uses them-that is in its form. Folktales tell of many beings who could be called ethereal: witches, fairies, clairvoyant women, trolls, giants, dwarves, good and evil sorcerers, dragons and mythical animals.

Lüthi maintained that folktales not only lack any sense of gap between the everyday world and the world of the supernatural, but also lack the dimension of depth. Its characters are figures without substance, without inner life, without an environment, they lack any relation to past and future, to time altogether. The

person and animals depicted in folktales lack psychological depth. Only rarely does the folktale mention sentiments and attributes for their own sake or to create a certain atmosphere. It mentions them when they influence the plot. Attributes and sentiments are expressed in actions. The whole realm of sentiment is absent from folktale characters and as a result they lack all psychological depth. Individual narrator may interject a word about the hero's sorrow or joy. If this happens, this is only incidental embellishment and does not pertain essentially to the folktale as a form. The hero and the heroine who find one another after many wild adventures celebrate their reunion or wedding simply and without emotional outburst. Folktales show us flat figures rather than human beings with active inner lives as nowhere is this internal emotional state expressed. A heroine succeeds in observing a command to keep silent for seven years, but the folktale does not say anything about the psychological distress and conflict that might have aroused in her as a reaction to the situation. Folktales break down the rich complexity of human beings. According to Lüthi one cannot speak of the characters of the folktales as being intelligent. The tasks of cleverness that occur in the folktale are not truly tests of intelligence, as Charolotte Bühler has observed because "they are derived from such a specific situation that no cunning could hit upon it. The solution depends on very specific aids that do not depend on the sagacity of the person but are offered to him by lucky chance" (Lüthi, 1986).

As in other disciplines, the study of folk-narrative has been deeply colored by the gendered views of its theoreticians. The very tools of folk-narrative research like the Aarne-Thompson tale type and motif listings are subject to gender bias, as many researchers have established. Women are listed as 'wives', women's accomplishments disappear in to male listing, women's courage become 'help' for a man, and capable princesses are maddeningly listed under the form of their temporary imprisonment (Lundell, 1983: 149-163). In his '*Deutsche Mythologie*' Jacob Grimm speaks of "a vast number of stories and customs handed down through lengthened periods from father to son". He here simply ignores the fact that in the '*kinder-und Hausmarchen*' (1812-1815) at least eighty percent of the tales were collected from female informants. We find a similar proportion in tales from a number of European collections.

Folktales have been attacked as escapist fantasies, as a basic reinforcement of conservative social structures and of patriarchal values. Active heroine in folktales represents the utopian strain in such stories. For women in traditional societies a utopian situation was one where a woman was free to choose or not to choose her own life partner, and where marriage meant love but more importantly, equality and respect. The active heroine in folktale sets out to make her own life, to change the rules in her own favour. Morgiana, the active and powerful heroine of "Alibaba and the Forty Thieves", does not make war upon society, she simply uses her intelligence to make her master's space her own. A woman and a slave, she changes the rules to achieve equality. Her marriage is itself a transgression.

The tradition of folk literature is quite ancient in our country. Folk literature consists of women's songs, tales, sayings and proverbs, riddles, folk dramas, ballads and many such literary traditions. Songs of marriage, birth ceremony, naming ceremony, cradle songs, farmer's songs and many other folk songs for different occasions constitute the rich heritage of our literature, which represent our culture. These songs and tales were transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition, which is mainly preserved by women folk of our society. It was the women who composed and sung the folk-songs and narrated the folk tales in the domestic sphere as well as in social gathering.

Socially constituted gender roles form stereotypes. A stereotype, according to the Webster's New World's Dictionary is defined as an 'unvarying pattern, specially a fixed or conventional notion or concept of a person, group or idea etc, held by a number of people and allow for no individuality or critical judgment'. This stereotyping of gender, with the help of socialization process, has a sort of biological determinism, which starts with reproductive ability of women. Sigmund Freud said, for women "anatomy is destiny". Women are characterized with a lack, the lack of the genital. Thus they are incomplete. They stand inferior to man biologically, even physically, they are weaker. This sort of biological determinism has been used till date, to justify the submissive position of women. (Bhasin 2000:10). Women, for a long time, themselves did not question this stereotyping of women.

Individuals are converted from biological male and biological female into man and woman respectively with the process of socialization which takes up the task of gendering individuals. Speaking on socialization, Ruth Hartley (Hartley cited in Bhasin, 2000) believed that socialization takes place through four processes, namely, manipulation, canalization, verbal appellation and activity exposure. The idea of gender is constructed through these four processes and slowly permeates into the psyche of the individual. We know that gender is socially constructed, and so does one's personality. It is important to note here that the basic differences in a man and woman do not seem to have any genetic foundation. It is a result of one's culture, which is injected in an individual through socialization process.

The social and cultural construction of gender refers to processes of articulating sexual differences socially and culturally. The argument against women is very obvious. Women's role in procreation (pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing) makes them weaker and thus the popular belief is that they require male protection and control. As a result of these procreating roles, women behave differently than men, becoming more caring, emotionally bounded to other people-and thus incapable of handling hard public tasks, which require investment in general interests, sometimes even ignoring individual needs. On the other hand, what women do in their day to day life, taking care of the children, home, men, sick and old people in addition to their household works like cooking, weaving, washing, cleaning, and also working at the paddy fields, remain unaccounted. They are seen as those people who do not produce, but only reproduces and consume resources which men produce- women's hard work is simply ignored and taken for granted as their duty. The general conception is that women do not need to be paid for their work and in any case men are their to support them and their children. The system appears natural and based on one fact that cannot be changed: women's role in procreation.

2.5 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE AND FOLKLORE

Feminist scholars (e.g. Bohan, 2002; Epstein, 1997; Leaper, 2000), in turn have focused on the question of whether dichotomous sex-typed gender

distinctions reinforce biological essentialism and therefore sustain gender inequalities. Feminist researchers increasingly argue that two categories are not adequate to describe variations in sex and gender experienced by individuals across their lives.

The realization of self identity is the root of the feminist attitude, which out-broke spontaneously due to suppressed position of women in the society. The agony and plight gradually took form of bold thoughts and protests. It gradually transformed into self esteem and praises for women folk. It displayed concern for women's problems. Therefore position of women as reflected in folktales is worth studying in this context, because in its oral tradition folktales are the integral part of a country. Children grow up listening to these folktales and thus have a deep rooted effect on every child and play a vital role in the making of the ethos and the aesthetics of a person. These tales have texts which carry some or the other cultural context in them. They are moving metaphors which gain new meaning in this context.

With the publication of her book *The Second Sex* in 1949, Simon De Beauvoir emerged to be known as the founder of feminist criticism. In the beginning part of her book *The Second Sex* Beauvoir explains the difference between the Sex and the Gender. According to her the gender difference is created by the system of society and the term 'feminine' is a social construct. Gender based role differentiation is basic to the understanding of women's status because women's studies today take power as central to role and status differentiation. The context of role and power is essential to understand women's status in general and of tribal women in particular. Gender is a major but not the only differentiating factor conditioning divisions in human societies. Basically biological it is reflected in cultural norms that assigned specific roles to man and women in a society. Both were thus socialized to bear the responsibilities of the roles assigned to them. Men were to be bread winners and custodians of property and of women and children who depended on them. Women were to produce heirs, socialize children, be 'homemakers' and thus be confined to the domestic arena while men dealt with the world outside. A set of norms was associated with

these roles to which a status was assigned, according to a person's position in the hierarchy (Mair, 1972:59).

At the end of the 20th century, from the social, critical and particularly feminist viewpoint it is the Grimms' handling of women which has led to the greatest criticism. The fairy tale has been accused of being woman hating and misogynist and it has been pointed out that the role of the woman is passive and unemancipated. The expectations from the characters are those of a patriarchal world in which the man is expected to perform great deeds and woman has a servile function. She is humiliated as a goose girl or leads a Cinderella like existence in the scullery. A woman is encouraged to be passive, tread the well-worn path, not deviate to the right or left and not to do any thing dangerous. She is expected to sit and wait for her prince charming or some gracious man who may lead her out of danger. There lies the success of the heroine in the world of the folk tales and fairy tales. A shining example of feminine passivity is Sleeping Beauty who spends a hundred years lifeless in the castle before the prince wakes her up by kissing her. Thus the roles played by both men and women are clearly defined in the tales. A beautiful girl does not need to act, but to wait patiently until the right man comes her way. That decision of who is right and who is not is decided in most of the cases by the male guardians of the girl in question. A girl's role is just to be beautiful, just as Snow White lies unconscious in her coffin until a prince turns up, and Cinderella requires a prince to set her free from the situation. Dependent, coy, shy, women catch the fancy of the men who want to be the hero in their life. Woman having a mind of her own is not accepted with an open mind by the society as she refuses to be treated as a doormat. Such women are termed rebel by the society.

'One is not born a woman but becomes one'. This is a famous phrase coined by Simon de' Beauvoir. This statement underscores the basic distinction between sex and gender. In most societies, biological differences are translated into socially institutionalized roles and positions. Gender refers to socio-cultural definitions of man and woman; the way societies distinguish between them and assign different roles to them. Society takes up the task of converting a biological male into a man and a biological female into a woman by prescribing masculine

and feminine qualities to them respectively. According to Ann Oakley 'gender is a matter of culture'. She asserts that gender distinction is constructed by society, based on sex differences, which are biological in nature (Oakley 1985:16).

2.6 FOLKTALES AND ROLE OF GENDER

Women happen to be the source of much of what has been collected and published about traditional folklore genres. Folklore is an accessible tool of subversion because the vernacular-common knowledge- belongs to the people. Folk art forms do not require special training or certification from outside the community. Easily accessible folk arts and folklore are critical tools for disrupting, challenging and resisting powerful social systems and social injustice. Because folk genres are accessible, fluid and used contextually, individuals and groups can use them to reformulate cultural notions to comment critically and persuasively on social life.

For women different genres of folklore have been especially important because women traditionally have had very less avenues than men for expression and participation in the public sphere. In many cultures, women and girls have less access to education than men and boys and may not be able to read and write but still they produce material culture, oral culture, dance and rituals. Through their cultural expressive traditions, women define alternative social ideas and knowledge, articulate opposition to social injustice and give voice to their creativity and aesthetic values. Even when done from a relatively disempowered position, this resistance is an exercise of power in the social construction of meaning. Culture as we know is not a fixed, unified or clearly bounded whole, but rather is part of an ongoing process of revision and negotiation. Through their expressive culture and despite various constraints, women actively participate in this process to produce culture and social knowledge.

Culture often involves subversion which can be realized in several ways. One of the ways is how women have used their folk genres to define an alternative cultural space and to critique and subvert patriarchal gender relations. For women sharing stories and personal experience narratives may be a means of mutual affirmation and mutual recognition that reflects the experience of being

gendered - that is being situated as female within a particular society. When women meet and present a world view that they know is contradictory to men's, it can be seen as an act of rebellion and subversion. In many cultures, women have their own expressive genres through which they comment on their lives in all women settings. These forms of women's expression may serve to channel anger, sorrow, and trauma in ways that offer a strategy for dealing with life's hardships.

The history of our society reveals that for ages and ages women were subjugated by man to secondary status and were suppressed in all walks of life. The patriarchal systems of our society compelled women to safeguard the patriarchal values throughout their lives. In each of their acts and even in their thoughts they had tremendous tension of men's authority. Women were not allowed to live and think independently. Depressed and frustrated, under such circumstances women expressed their anguish and plight, their wishes and expectations through the songs they composed and sang and through the stories they told. Through these folk literatures women expressed themselves and their views and wishes and revealed their identity in various aspects of life.

A woman's life is perceived almost entirely within a framework of hardship and suffering. The perception and organization of life as a chain of crises and stresses is particularly true of rural and older women. A wife's patience and ability to endure suffering are also put to test. If the woman has with God's power withstood these trials, she recovers her former rights and is rehabilitated.

The foolish and gullible wife, the scheming and resourceful mistress of the house, the helpful beggar women, and the victimized girl, are some of the figures that we come across if we look into the folktales. In the article 'Folktale Heroines and the Type of Motif Indexes' Torborg Lundell has pointed out that careful investigation of the folklore material shows that the model for female conduct reflected in folktale over a wide geographical area is far from confined to the submissive beauty. There is one type of tale (Armor and Psyche type) where heroines must undergo a series of ordeals and prove her intelligence and

resourcefulness before she rediscovers her lost husband. But the semantic of the type index, however fails to recognize the adventurous aspect of the heroines' activities. Lundell here points out that Aarne and Thompson downplayed female activity that this folktale type witnessed with its aggressive and capable female protagonist. The adventurous and leadership qualities of a folktale heroine are ignored and independent characters are also unrepresented. It is important to note that there seems to be different standards for evaluating behaviour of women and men. And in some labeling male is given credit instead of the female in the title. In most of the cases women are ignored as far as giving credit in the title. Here an animal or something else will find a place in the title than a woman with all her specialty or peculiarity. This kind of gender discrimination is noticed in the labeling of the type and motif index of the folktales.

The study of folklore in general and folk tales and fairy tales in particular gives us the impression that women and men are in most of the cases not treated equally. One and the same action can under some situation label a girl as naughty and a boy as good. (R.Bottigheimer). The first requirement of a heroine in a fairy tale or folk tale is that she must be beautiful. According to countless fairy tales she is the fairest in the world. This definitely fits in with men's wishful thinking. There will be very few men who would not be interested in fair and beautiful woman. Even in this 21st century there is tremendous public interest in beautiful princesses and their love affairs. If a member of a royal family marries someone below his rank and status then correlation with a fairy tale is always made, still today. While a woman is judged by her beauty and looks, the same qualities are not expected of a man in our society. This is the reason why in our society even today a dark girl is not welcome in the family. The colour of her skin is so important that the parents of a dark skinned girl are always worried about finding a match for her. Added to this is the kind of insult the girl receives also speaks for society's double standard in treating a man and woman differently. But in spite of the usual stereotypes inherent in the genre, the portrayal of women is very diverse. The woman is seen in all social positions and classes, from the queen and princess to the scullery maid, beggar woman, and demoness to the Goddess, intelligent old woman, powerful mother etc. We find women playing all sorts of

different roles in the family: child, young girl, and sister, bride, loving mother, cruel stepmother and both loving as well as cruel grandmother. The spectrum of their outward appearance ranges from stunning beauty to unbelievable ugliness, of their intelligence to the one who is unbelievably stupid, to the riddle princess for whom none of her suitors are a match intellectually. There is the servile, patient, modest woman, the hard working and the lazy, the fertile and the childless woman, the cruel and the cunning woman. Her moral qualities can be a help to others. Even the position of the woman within the family can differ a lot. On the one hand she is completely subservient to the will of her husband and has no chance of standing up to his despotic dogmatism in order to prove her innocence. On the other hand we sometimes see her as her husband's second wife who as the real boss of the household holds all the power in her hand.

Fundamental character traits of the woman, which are often decisive for the plot of the story, are her unwavering loyalty, unflinching selflessness and self sacrifice, her long suffering determination. These are the qualities that are required of the wife who wants to rescue her husband or from the sister who wants to save her brother. This duty to find her lost husband or win him back from the evil co-wives is often the fate of women in folk tales and fairy tales. These tales concern themselves more with the maturing process of women than that of men. Female characters whose attributes are grounded in the femininity schema lead happy lives if their behaviour revolves around beauty, passivity and dependence on outside forces. This is so implicated in the narrative that it constitutes a cause and effect relationship and the drastic consequences of breaching this formula imply a misogynistic view of women.

2.7 CULTURAL CONTEXT AND FOLKTALES

Though closely linked to power, gender differentiation is legitimized through a culture based on biological differences. Men and women are socialized to bear the responsibilities of the role assigned to them through a superior or inferior status. Inequalities are thus legitimized by attaching roles and responsibilities to specific social positions that determine an individual's social position. Thus a gender based concept of status denotes women's legal, social

and psychological position and rights and privileges in a given social setup. It is conditioned by the prevalent ideas and functions in that society, the attitudes, the behaviour of men towards women and their own acceptance or rejection of these roles. The development and corresponding changes in their status is linked directly with social and cultural tradition, stages of economic development, level of education and political participation. Such factors affect the national as well as regional characteristics of women.

The examination of women in their relationship to culture has received its impetus and its direction from feminism as a political movement. There is a growing awareness that the nature of the oppression of women is cited both in material conditions as well as in social and cultural attitudes and practices and so needs to be combated at both levels. To understand the position of women, folk tales can play an important role as the vital medium of expression of folk culture and tradition. The themes of tales differ according to the demands of the culture. Culture decides the form and content of tales. In the context of Indian culture, we observe that the views held by the culture towards women are generally reflected in the tales. Almost all the story types in one way or the other tend to establish the typical Indian image of women. Here women have always been subordinate to male interests and a woman is always regarded as the possession of man and their duty is to safeguard patriarchal values. Because of these cultural hegemony only the tales of chaste women, childless women, jealousy of co-wives, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law conflicts, projection of beautiful and cunning women and tales projecting the supremacy of motherhood are found in large numbers. Thus the study of tales in their cultural context is very much necessary to understand their uniqueness. There is no denying the fact that in our country women are exploited everywhere but the nature of exploitation varies from culture to culture. To have an unbiased view of women as represented in folktales we need to take into account the particular culture to which a woman belongs. Isolated study may not give us a proper understanding of the position of women. For the purpose of our study, our attempt would be to analyze the folktales of the two tribes of Assam. They are –Rabhas (patriarchal now), and Garos (matriarchal). The two tribes under study have a lot of similarity but some differences do exist among

them. One prominent and clear difference is that Garos being a matrilineal society, their culture tends to be different from the other one which adhere to patriarchal culture. It would be interesting to find out the position women enjoy in these two different setups. It is popularly believed that women enjoy a better position in the matriarchal society as women forms the centre of the family and inherits the parental property. Whether this assumption is a myth or a reality needs to be seen in the course of the study through the help of the folktales. Here we need to study the theory that the matriliney in itself confers a higher status on women. Though the social system conditions the women's status, one can not state unconditionally that her status deteriorates with patriarchy or improves unconditionally with matriliney. The nuances of these systems have to be studied.

Folklore unlike the elite tradition assigns an independent domain to the females where they enjoy complete spatial and temporal autonomy. In the elite perspective, knowledge, truth and reality are constructed in terms of dominant gender and female voices are ignored or given less importance in writing culture. But in traditional societies women are seen as the tradition bearers and instruments in the cultural continuum. Male dominance exists on different cultural level and needs to be understood as a relative concept. It is expressed in various ways and its content differs in various historical and cultural contexts. The process of gender construction is a life long process of interaction where gender is evolved and confirmed in relation to several sets of norms. Norms of gender prescribe how men and women are supposed to act, behave, look like etc. These sets of norms are relatively stable but not static. Individuals are not simply reproducing norms of gender, but transforming them and producing new ones. Thus we are influenced by and we also influence the gender culture.

Culture is a learned way of behaviour, which is transmitted from generation to generation. In fact it is the social heritage which an individual receives from his/her group. It is something which accumulates over a period. There are certain norms, values and beliefs in any society, which are culturally determined and socially transmitted. The culture of a society can be tangible and intangible at the same time. The tangible aspects pertain to the objects, symbols, and technology of a particular society while the

intangible aspects refer to the beliefs, ideas, values and expectations in any society. Ideas on one's gender identity are also a learned way of behaviour, which is a contribution of our culture, especially one's intangible culture. When a child is born the mother is usually in most cultures in charge of breast feeding the baby, taking care and socializing it (Ortner 1997:16). Infant and children are considered a part of nature. Women with their association with infant and children are tagged together with 'nature'. Since men lack a natural basis for family orientation i.e. since they do not reproduce, the cultural reasoning seems to go that men are the 'natural' proprietors of religion, politics and other realms of cultural thought. Thus men are associated with culture i.e. higher form of human thoughts involving art, religion and law. Children right from a very tender age, internalize the traits of masculinity or femininity that reflects in their behaviour, attitude and roles they take up. That gender is a matter of culture as mentioned by Ann Oakley, and that it has nothing to do with one's biology becomes clear if we look at Margaret Mead's work titled "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies". Mead, an anthropologist, has tried to prove that sex is not a determining factor for gender. The qualities of being masculine or feminine have nothing to do with one's biology and the root of these differences lies in one's culture. Mead found from her study that the Arapesh tribe from New Guinea is gentle, mild and affectionate and soft. Both men and women behaved in a so-called feminine manner. While the Mundugumor tribe of New Guinea who were cannibalistic, lived in a hostile environment and there both men and women were masculine. Both are expected to be aggressive, harsh, violent and competitive. Nevertheless, in the Tchambuli tribe, male and female behaviour was contradictory to the normative roles assigned to man and woman in most societies i.e. women were masculine and men were feminine in nature. Women were more dominating and managed all the major works of the family while men were less responsible than women were. They went for shopping, wore curls and gossiped which are considered to be womanly habits. The study conducted by Mead proves that human behaviour is conditioned by the demand of the situation in which one is placed irrespective of male or female. Patriarchal social set up is

responsible for assigning submissive role for women and dominant role for the men in our society. (as cited in Biswal, 2006)

Socialization as a process of transmitting culture, consists of complex processes of interaction through which the individual learns the habits, beliefs, skills and standards of judgment that are necessary for effective participation in social groups and communities. A child comes to learn about the norms, expectations, and different roles to be played in the group through the process of socialization. A child learns about his/her gender identity by learning what is she or he is expected to do by others. An individual learns about his/her gender identity by knowing what she/he is not, or in other words by about the other which helps in the emergence of one's self. For example a male child learns to conform to his own gender group by negating all the activities that a girl child does. A male child is always encouraged to play with a gun or a car and a girl child with doll or kitchen utensils. Thus a male child becomes violent and plays with hazardous games and keeps away from girlish items fearing that he would be branded a girl. Similarly comments like girls can cry but boys should not cry in public or in other words should not show their emotion also has a lot of impact in the sensitive minds of the young ones. Socialization is a continuous process that helps to learn the normative behaviour, which mostly happens to be stereotypic behaviour already mentioned. The very first thing the child is socialized about is the idea regarding his/her gender identity. Thus a girl child is generally associated with the colour 'pink' while a male child is so often associated with the color 'blue'. Although there is no harm in girl liking the blue color or for that matter any other color and vice versa. No one can explain this color association logically but a notion has already been formed and carried forward traditionally. In one study, it was found that words such as "handsome", "sturdy" and "tough" were used to describe boy infants and "dainty", "sweet" and "charming" for girl infants though there was no difference in the sizes of the babies. (Giddens 1984). A girl is expected to reach home before it was dark but no such time binding exist for a boy. Thus a boy grows in life without any inhibition and can deal with the problems of life in a much more practical way. Compared to this a girl is not free to deal with life. She grows but

along with her grows her fear, inhibition, resulting in lack of confidence in herself. Thus gender discrimination continues as she crosses each stage in her life. By the time she reaches a point in her life where she could question certain prevailing norms of the society she herself starts believing that men are superior and almost willingly accepts the subordinate position. Thus male hegemony continues. Discrimination which was traditionally done against women by society is sustained by women themselves.

When we talk about universal devaluation of women, Sherry Ortner rightly links women's secondary status to the tendency, in almost all cultures to view women as closer to nature and men as responsible for cultures. In the nature-culture debate, nature is often seen as subordinate to, lesser than, culture. The ability of human beings to transform the givens of nature into cultural artifacts and tools, together with the arts of ritualizing nature invests them with glory and social significance because they are able to transform and transcend the given, the raw, i.e. nature. Because of their 'natural' roles of childbirth and lactation and the resulting social and psychological roles of domestication and child rearing, women are considered closer to nature or intermediate between nature and culture. This attitude is common to all cultures, with of course, variations according to history, political and socio-economic conditions. (Ortner, 67-74).

2.8 PATRIARCHY, GENDER AND RELIGION

In gender politics, the word patriarchy refers to any form of social power given disproportionately to men. In other words patriarchy stands for power and authority. The word has a number of affiliations and goes on to symbolize possession, control and belonging. And its arms extend to almost every field-philosophy, law, governance, society itself, and the more modestly constructed family. Many construct this to mean a gender hierarchy in which men dominate or exploit women. The patriarchal mindset wants women to be objects, totally under the control of men.

Much of patriarchy has its roots in religion. The roots of patriarchy lie in the myths of creation and the religious order based on them. The initial

relationship between the creator and the created world has located itself in the power of man and the subordination of woman. Thus intent has been camouflaged by other myths- myths of protection, of punishment for transgression, of the power of women, their indispensability and the glory of motherhood. Thus any questioning of the patriarchal stronghold has to contest this domain of belief and begin with the experience of women, their emotional strengths, intellectual abilities, and capacity to resist and endure, to conceptualize and to transcend the body even as they realize its centrality.

The patriarch stands for Father Right, the right of ownership over the seed. He is not a person but an institution, a mindset, a practice, hegemony, and thus an oppressor. Religions which believe the Manusmriti, Bible or other religious text often follow it faithfully by its every word, which puts the men in charge. The Bible, which most Christians live by states boldly that every woman should be submissive to man. In Manusmriti, it is said that every woman should treat her husband as her God and her chastity is known from the fact that how much faithful is she towards her husband. With that in mind and those beliefs instilled in cultures, Women do not stand a chance at gaining strength in their gender. But interestingly enough, for a variety of complex reasons women also support and perpetuate patriarchy. This is called internalization of domination. Women continually renegotiate their bargaining power. There is no doubt that women often treat their son better, become partial towards them at the cost of the daughter, deprive their daughters of education, restrict their freedom, encouraging daughters to sacrifice for the family and be happy with that, mistreat daughter-in laws and so on. But all these need to be understood in the context of the respective power and position that men and women have and enjoy in family and in the society.

Women and oppression against them vary from culture to culture. Feminists are convinced that patriarchy is the greatest enemy of women. It is a kind of false consciousness that makes them accept all form of oppression unconditionally. Women in the west waged their war against patriarchy and held men as oppressor and are headed towards achieving an egalitarian society. Unlike west, situation in India is quite different. The custom, the value system and the

traditional heritage that Indian women are expected to uphold are the greatest hurdle in fighting out patriarchy and getting emancipated. The ideology of 'pativrata' and 'chastity' which Indian women have been made to cling contributes to the factors responsible as to why women find it difficult in encountering patriarchy face to face. Service to one's family is considered to be the ultimate duty of a woman. The ideology of 'pativrata' has been popularized among Indian women through folklore, religious and other mythological scriptures and certain rituals which are considered to be the mines of Hindu traditions. For instance the mythological characters like Savitri, Sita, and Damayanti has been valorized as the ideal image of an Indian woman. Such images which symbolize suffering perpetuate the impression that the destiny of a woman is to tolerate all kinds of injustice without any complain and always be ready to sacrifice anything they are asked for. The concept of *Pati Parameswar* says that the husband should be given the position of the almighty. A religious sanctity has been attached to women's subordination. Thus a woman internalizes such values from the very childhood and as a result of these values imbibed in her she considers all kinds of atrocities on her as natural in the name of obliging her *dharma*. Society also holds such timid and obliging women in high esteem. Although it is a different matter that in the process of negating herself and bearing all kinds of wrongs committed towards her she is only safeguarding the patriarchal values which are more often than not highly one sided and tries to protect the male interest. The male -centered view of life which goes on to privilege one gender over another has led to an inability to work towards holistic development. The discordant note of conflict and opposition to the other, of want and disease appear to be rooted in the basic concept of power which is one-sided and does not respect other perspectives and needs. It has spilled over into all areas of life: myth and culture, religious practices, folklore, physical geography, philosophical and epistemological quests and frameworks, socio-economic constructs, and history and art, and above all language.

Man has not only been viewed as the 'master' but also as the protector and the bread earner, a belief which in large measure is a myth. Epics and folktales alike throw up examples of how women have been abandoned or left

unprotected either because of the turn of events or because of male rejection, persecution or authority. There are also sufficient examples in real life, almost in every society, of women struggling to support their families-orphaned women, single or widowed women, abandoned wives, persecuted or rejected women, and those who support sick husbands and many who earn the bread while the men spend their earning in drink or self indulgence or women who take the charge of the family in the absence of the father and sometimes at the loss of both the parents sacrificing her own dreams. But while man gets recognition for his contribution or sacrifice towards the family, a woman's contribution goes unnoticed and unrecognized. These are realities which compel one to discern between the prevalent myth and its social face. But this myth has also constructed its own idea of masculinity, of men as strong, infallible creatures, as those who have a right to authority, respect and dignity.

India's obsession with a male child is a result of our religious obligations where the '*putra*' connotes to the one who can bring the parents out of hell. The rescuer from *put* or hell happens to be the son because there are certain religious rites, which has to be performed by son only. Women simply do not have any space there. Otherwise one would not attain salvation. Besides, there is a firm belief in our traditional society that the son comes as a support to the parents in their old age. The son is considered an asset whereas the daughter a liability. Opinion regarding daughters is culturally constructed where she is a *parayadhan* who has to be married off someday. Neglect of the girl child starts from her birth itself. When it comes to taking decision on behalf of one- between the boy and the girl of the family, it is always the male born of the family who is preferred. The son gets the preferential treatment, getting best of the available resources, whereas the girl needs to settle down with whatever comes her way as bonus. The upbringing of the girl is such that she is more or less conditioned to accept her fate without raising a hue and cry. The one who protests is again termed a rebel and faces different obstacles from the society. A girl is always a secondary member both in her parental family and her marital family. Her whole life passes in adjustments, compromises. Our tradition and culture puts pressure on the girl

to behave in a certain way and she is conditioned to depend on her brother, father before marriage and on husband and his family after marriage.

Religion which forms a greater aspect of one's culture carries even its gender related bias in its texts. For instance, Hindu religion is an embodiment of patriarchal dominance. In fact, most of the Hindu Mythology focuses on the sacrificing nature of women, for instance, the uncomplaining image of Sita, who worshipped her husband Rama, and could tolerate all atrocities of the society and her husband. She could jump into fire and even went on exile to the forest all alone to prove her chastity. Thus she was elevated to the position of Goddess and her example was given to every woman as the role model for inspiration. Through the character of Sita, what society wants and expects from every woman is unquestioning loyalty, ability to suffer pain, suffering, humiliation silently and total obedience towards her husband. These are of course expectations of the patriarchal society. Again Draupadi was shared by five brothers and was disrobed by her husband's cousin because her husbands had lost her to their cousins in game of dice. Yet after this great humiliation in public, she followed her husbands to the forests, leaving behind all comfort just like Sita. It seems Indian society has nothing but expectations from women. She is someone who is always ready to sacrifice and needs to forgive and forget all the injustice committed towards her. This is the ideal image of woman in India which is projected in our mythologies. The most interesting part is that in both the cases of Ramayana and Mahabharata, war was waged between men because of women like Sita and Draupadi but nobody even looks into the faults or weaknesses of men. Women are either eulogized or criticized and both contribute to her repression. Such criticism and eulogism escalates the expectation level of the society and creates an unseen barrier around the women. Women on their part also strive hard to meet high expectations and when they fail to fulfill such high expectation, they feel guilty and blame themselves. So does the society. But men are portrayed differently. Lord Krishna was portrayed as a great musician and women fell for him. That he was flirtatious with the '*gopis*' has been made insignificant. The loyalty and integrity of Lord Krishna's character was never questioned because chastity as a value is to be maintained by women. It has to be safeguarded by the

feminine gender. Men stand beyond it. One can also see that men won women in battles with force, sometimes for own self and sometimes for others as Bhishma won Amba, Ambika and Ambalika (but not marrying anyone of them) but women had to win men with austerity and penance. Gender stereotyping is immense in Hindu mythology. We cannot deny the influence of mythology in forming the psyche of both men and women in the long run. Knowingly and unknowingly people tend to idolize the heroes and heroines of the mythologies and in the process totally ignoring their faults.

Even Christian mythology perpetuates such gender stereotypes portraying the woman as inferior. It says that Adam was first created by God and Eve was created latter, to fulfill Adam's needs. Thus she was the secondary creation, the inessential, the other, who has been created to keep men at ease. Christianity preaches, God as the father, a male. Jesus was a man. Christianity has always given importance to men in its biblical texts. One can hardly see women in the post of priests. Priesthood requires lots of erudition and jurisdiction, so women are not fit enough to occupy these posts, as far as the traditional opinion on men and women goes. Thus they are kept in such jobs that suit their so-called 'nature'. Therefore they take the job of nuns, which involved nursing and teachings that were controlled by religious institutions. Nevertheless the Catholic Church still debar women from it although Church of England opened priesthood to women in 1992. When we glance at the different textbooks available to young children we find the same gender discrimination. Women are represented as teacher, nurse and when it comes to a leader or a pilot or a scientist the picture is invariably of a man. The perceived notion is that the so called soft jobs are for women which again is related to her emotional side and practical and bold field is left open to the men folk. Women are seen as caring but this does not mean that men cannot go for nursing or teaching or women cannot fly or work in a laboratory. But the suggestive pictures create some kind of impression in the young and impressionable mind and stays with him/her unconsciously. Mothers teach daughters to learn cooking, and other household jobs because these are the qualities that will be counted after marriage. All other qualities and qualification will be meaning less for a girl as she is judged by her abilities in cooking,

knitting, nursing etc. Achievements of the woman outside the four walls of the house are immaterial as no one is seriously interested in her growth as a person. A woman who steps outside and works and achieves like a man is seen as a threat and thus in every step a woman is discouraged in our patriarchal society. What comes easily to a man is not as easy for a woman as she needs to prove herself doubly compared to a man to win respect and acceptability for herself. Gender comes her way and she needs to work her way out against all sorts of discrimination resulting from gender bias.

Islam with its cultural practices like polygamy and purdah system is an epitome of objectification of women. One can find the gender discrepancies in case of Islam marriage practices where men can have more than one woman at the same time. One can also see patriarchal domination in Buddhist religion. Like Christianity, Buddhist women are also allotted the role of nuns.

History is an aspect of one's culture. History registers only those aspects which are highlighted in one's culture. Indeed history talks of the interaction between gender and culture. Various feminist writers have claimed that history denotes 'his-story'. In fact it has not adequately made much statement on women or rather remained silent on them. The silence maintained on women is too conspicuous through the pages of history. Our culture is such that only men and their activities have been highlighted. One would not find women outside the feminist context i.e. they have been in focus as somebody's daughter, mother or sister. History was the story of great kings and individuals. Similarly the world of folktales is also male-centric. We see kings and princes, rich merchants and well-to-do individuals as well as poor men as the principal characters of the tales where women play the supportive role of the wife, sister, daughter, mother etc. There are very few women characters in the folk tales who stand independently on their own. Although these tales are told chiefly by women and the audience is also women, there are very few positive and inspiring heroines. All we get is the portrayal of submissive beauties, ill-fated heroines tortured by step-mothers or by someone else, heroines who can have the only option of crying hopelessly in the majority of the tales. This kind of portrayal of course impresses the mind of the young ones, though negatively. Listening to these tales, the girls from the

very young age, start believing that it is natural on their part to suffer without uttering a word. These stories somehow impress their mind and psychologically they become prepared to accept the submissive role, the role prescribed by the patriarchal society.

2.9 STUDIES ON GENDER AND FOLKLORE

Gender has long been formally ignored as a relevant category in the study of folk-narrative. Paper devoted to gender questions has emerged with increasing frequency and urgency in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1989 Budapest Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, for example was devoted to questions of folk narrative and cultural identity; the 1990 *Societe Internationale d' Ethnographie et de Folklore* meeting in Bergen included many gender-related papers as did in 1992 International Society for Folk Narrative Research meeting in Innsbruck and the 1993 Nordic Folklore Symposium in Seattle, where papers by Torunn Selberg, Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, LeeanVirtanen, and Bente Gullveig Alver explored gender questions within the context of folk narrative and world view. Independently several ongoing projects have incorporated 'gender' as an ancillary or central concern: gender studies in the Finnish Folklore Fellows Summer School; Aili Nenola's Finnish Research project, 'Culture, Tradition and the Gender System'; her proposal for an international network of 'Folklore Fellows in Gender Studies' which has found deep resonance among folklorists and folk-narrativists around the world; and 'Folklore and Gender' (volume of essays) which recognizes the importance of the subject by bringing together and publishing papers from sessions devoted to gender in folk narrative.

In the process of folk-narrative production, every story component and every analytic process is fundamentally conditioned by gender. Voicing within tales depends to a very great extent on the gender of the voice that tells a tale. Does the heroine speak? What does she say? Is there a heroine at all? Is there a hero? What does he do? Each of these narrative acts depends on social patterning within a society (Fox, 1987: 565-567; Kodish, 1987: 574-575). A tale can be male or female by virtue of its having a male protagonist, a male teller, a male

collector and a male scholar who analyses the resultant text could be quadruply male (Bottigheimer, 1993: 267 ff.). The same can be true of a female tale that has a heroine, female teller, female collector and female analyst. The act of story telling itself is highly sensitive to gender issues. Women protagonists in tales told by men occupy a special position, one that differs from their position in tales told by women. Men and women also tell the same tales differently (Köhler-Zülch, 1991: 109). These are all aspects of gender-based 'filter-effects' (Dollerup et al, 1984: 241-265) that emerge in the act of story telling.

Recent discourse on folk narrative research has recognized the gender factor in cultural studies. Gender is perceived not only as an enduring variable for the study of folklore matters but also as a potential factor for performing a particular narrative either for recitation or for memory.

The increasing participation of women in academia has broadened scholarly inquiry in all disciplines. Women have brought new perspectives to many old questions in folklore and folk narrative. But the results of the contemporary women's scholarship are to be integrated into the mainstream so that the full range of human experience male and female can be recognized and appreciated from women's as well as from men's perspective. Folk narratives after all are

“sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires... (they)...continue to play a privileged function in the reproduction of various social construct including gender and narrative ”

(Bacchilega, 1993: 11)

The preoccupation with the subject of women in the fairy tales and folk tales was dormant for many years but recently the interest in this area of research has surfaced at different conferences, seminars and in articles. The movement towards the emancipation of women together with the currently fashionable interest in gender studies played their role in making people aware of this subject. In these studies centering women in relation to their status, position in society

through the help of folklore material the researchers examine the active and passive roles of the woman.

In the 20th Century gender difference is not only acknowledged by scholars but also came up for discussion and became a subject of research. Margaret Mead realized that “the difference between the sexes is one of the important conditions upon which mankind has built the many varieties of human culture that give human beings dignity and stature” (Mead, 1949). Simone de Beauvoir was creating the genesis of the view of gender that sex is biological identity, gender is a social construct when she had written her famous statement: ‘one is not born but rather becomes a women... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...’ (Beauvoir, 1972: 295). Another definition of gender formulated by Bonnie Kime Scott (as cited in Das, 2005:7) is also worth mentioning here:

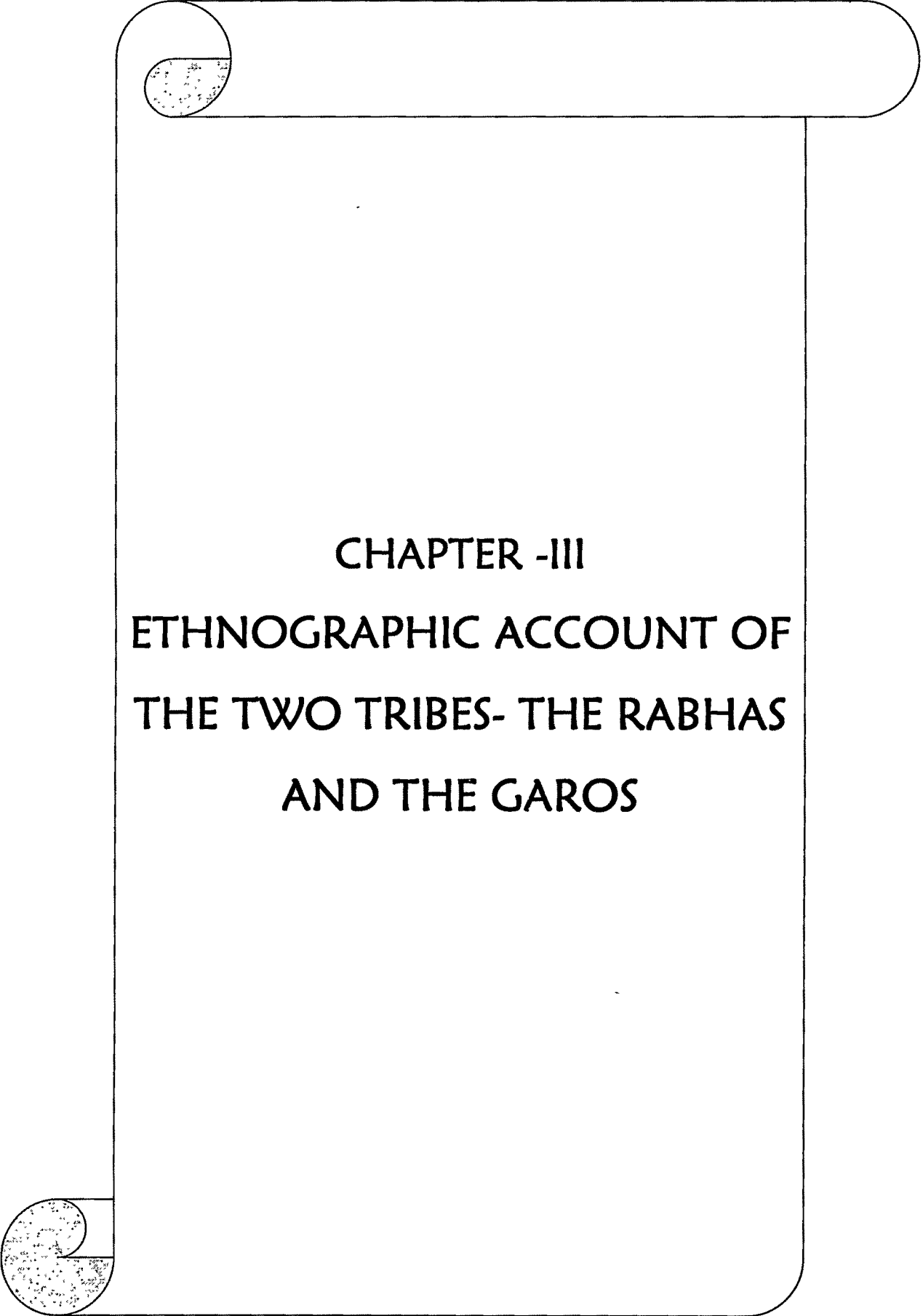
‘Gender is a category constructed through cultural and social systems. Unlike sex, it is not a biological fact determined at conception... gender is more fluid, flexible and multiple in its options than the... unchanging biological binary of male and female’. (Scott 2)

Gender relations are always complex. While women may critique men through their expressive tradition, they may simultaneously strive to preserve the honour of their households and the same men they criticize. Further while men might be culturally defined as superior to women within a particular group, they might hold an oppressed position relative to other men within wider society.

It is also necessary to recognize that women’s culture is not always subversive. Folkways may communicate messages regarding how women should conform to their social roles and sometimes warn about the repercussions of violating cultural norms. However clearly throughout the world women articulate their resistance to male dominance, present alternative social interpretations and offer practical knowledge through folkways and cultural expressive traditions that are specific to various collectivities of women.

Time and again folklore about women returns with the obsession with distinguishing them from men. The qualities associated with men and women tend to be polarized into binary oppositions. It is sometimes difficult to remember that women and men have much more in common than in differentiation, and that the biological and cultural possibilities of each are by no means exhausted by the two categories.

We must acknowledge the fact that traditional folklore is not restricted to any one particular group of people but crosses culture, classes, and sex/ genders.



CHAPTER -III
ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF
THE TWO TRIBES- THE RABHAS
AND THE GAROS

CHAPTER III

ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE TWO TRIBES- THE RABHAS AND THE GAROS

3.1 THE RABHAS

The Rabha-speaking community belongs to the Tibeto-Burman stock of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese family. The tribe is a branch of the Boro group which also includes besides the Rabha, the Garo, the Tiwa, the Dimasa, the Hill Tippera, The Mech and so forth. To find out the little known origin, the ethnic identity and the history of the migration of the Rabhas, a great deal of research is still required. Scholars and researchers have expressed different opinions regarding the origin of the Rabhas. According to Waddle (1900): "the Rabhas are the off shoot of the Kachari tribe". Dalton holds that "the Rabha customs, with the exception of the laws of inheritance and marriage, resemble those of the Garos or those of the Panikoches" (Dalton, E.T.: "Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, India Studies past and present". Calcutta 1872, page 87). Allen is of the opinion that "The Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appears to be an offshoot of the Garos" (Allen, B.C.: "Assam District Gazetteers, 1905, vol.III, Page-49). Gait said "there seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what the people really are. In lower Assam it is asserted that they are an offshoot of the Garos- while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kocharis on the roads of Hinduism: that they belong to the great Bodo family is certain." (Gait, Sir Edward: "Census of India, 1891, Vol. I, Reprint Pt.-II, page-232). According to Playfair, "it appears that the Rabhas occupied the Garo Hills wherefrom they came down to the plains. That their original habitat was the region bordering the northern slopes of the Garo hills is also supported by the fact that certain section of the tribe which live on the borders of that district, have no words for the north and the south but describe the former by the word 'Bhota-hi-

chue' or Bhutan and the later by 'Tura', the district headquarter of Garo Hills. (Playfair, 1909 (reprint 1975): "The Garos", page-19). To sum up, it seems that the Mongoloid people came in successive waves from the north and the northeastern region; they had partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Austroloid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabhas and the Garos etc. The Indo-Aryan Strain appears to have entered Assam along with the spread of the cult of Brahmanism and contribute to the racial makeup of its inhabitants. (Das, B.M: "The Ethnic Affinities of the Rabhas", 1960, p 4). It is observed that the migration of the Rabhas had taken place from the Tibetan region to the Brahmaputra valley and then to the hills of Assam. There is a legend current among the Garos that when Hashong was the chief of the powerful *Atong* clan, he brought the Rabhas into the Someswari Valley to till the land, because at the time the Garos, being nomads, were not acquainted with the more settled methods of husbandry. Afterwards, when Brakman, the minister of Hashong treacherously slew his master and seized the supreme power, a period of bloodshed and anarchy followed and the Rabhas were driven out from the valley. (Bora, M: Folklore and Folklife of the *Pati* Rabhas; a case study of Kamrup and Goalpara District of Assam, unpublished Ph.D thesis, GU-1988)

The word "Rabha" seems to have been derived from the word 'Rabha', which means "to bring". Since the Rabhas were brought to earth by their Risi, the supreme God, from the Rongkrang i.e. heaven, they are called Raba or Rabha. Secondly, since Dadan, the traditional hero of the Rabhas brought them apart from the others; they began to call themselves Rabhas.

The Rabhas are one of the plains tribes of Assam. They are mostly concentrated in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Darrang and Sonitpur. The Rabhas have some pockets in Meghalaya, West Bengal, Nepal, and Bangladesh. But their main concentration is only found on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. In the opinion of Grierson, the term "Rabha" is a Hindu name of the Kacharis.

The Rabhas belong to the great Bodo group of the Mongoloid race. Major Playfair believes that after migration from the Tibetan region they settled in the Garo Hills region, now a part of the state of Meghalaya, and from there they spread over to different regions of Assam. Hodson observed that culturally and linguistically the Rabhas are more akin to the Garos (Bordoloi et al, 1987, p.119). Sir E.A. Gait identifies the Rabhas as two distinct ethnic groups and says they are called *Totlas* and sometimes *Datiyal* Kacharis in the undivided district of Darrang (p.120).

The Rabhas no doubt have cultural similarities and also ethnic affinity with a number of ethnic groups; and these similarities have been marked by different persons during different period of time. Dalton on the other hand, treated Rabhas as the branch of the Kachari race having connection with the Garos (1972:87). Endle (1911:83) and Waddel (1900:65) had seen their affinity with the Kachari (*Datiyal* or *Border* Kachari). Allen's view was that Rabhas were a section of the Bodos and appeared to be an offshoot of the Garo (1903:49). Their similarities with the Garos had also been marked by Playfair (1909:9-20). He also believed that the *Atongs* and *Rugas* (division of the Garos) had a common origin with the Rabhas and the Koches. Gait in connection with the affinity of this people states,

There seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to what these people really are. In lower Assam it is asserted that they are an off-shoot of the Garos while in Kamrup and Darrang it is thought that they are Kacharis on the road to Hinduism. That they belong to the great Bodo family is certain, but it is not equally clear that the Rabhas are more closely allied to any one tribe of that group than to another. On the whole, therefore, although some Kacharis and Garos may have become Rabhas just as others have become Koches, it seems probable that the Rabhas in reality are a distinct tribe"

(1891:232)

Allen also reports, "The rank of the Rajbongshi is recruited from the aboriginal tribes such as Mech, Rabha and Kachari..." (1905:39). Dr. B.M. Das in

one of his works had scientifically established the fact that the Rabhas were more closely allied to the Garos rather than any other tribe of the Bodo group. Dr. Das further supported the view expressed by E.A. Gait that the Rabhas were ethnically and culturally a distinct tribe. He said “.....it seems probable that Mongoloid people came in successive waves from the north and north-eastern region. They have partly or wholly absorbed the autochthonous Austroloid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabha, the Garo, etc.

3.1.1 *Khel* (sub-group or sect) or *Faid* (lineage, ‘gotro’)

Upen Rabha Hakacham in one of his article¹ mentioned that Rabhas are mainly divided into eight different *Khel* or sub-groups. Out of these three Non-Aryan groups still hold on to their language which are as follows-*Maitoria*, *Rongdania* and *Chonga* (*Kocha Rabha*, *Koch*, *Chunga*). Those groups which forgot their language completely are five Aryan groups i.e. *Pati*, *Dahari*, *Bitoliya*, *Totla* and *Hana*. These five Aryan *Khels* (sub-groups) use *Lemakatha* i.e. Rabhamiz (Rabha+ Assamese) at their homes to express themselves. Moreover depending on characteristics features such as generosity, brutality, stupidity, politeness, merciless, popularity, decency, laziness, lethargic, addicted, well-mannered, people were observed and neighbours, researchers and religious *Gurus* gave them names like *Saraniya*, *madahi*, *Dhimali*, *Kachari*, *Haluwa* etc and subsequently Rabhas got special identity according to these special features or characteristics.

According to Bhubin Rabha², Rabhas are divided into 9 different *Khel* or *faid* (sub-groups). There is a history regarding this division which is as follows-

Dadan was the chief king among Rabhas. He made arrangement for *Baikho* or *Khoksi Puja* (worshipping) at a place called *Athiyabari*. His soldiers took part in it. *Baikho* was the goddess of agriculture and kings who used to

1. Hakacham,U.R. “ Rabha Janagostir Bivinna Upagosti Aru Teulokar Samaj Byabastha” in *Janajati Samaj Sanskriti*, 2008 :p190

2. Rabha, Bhubin. *Rabha Janajati Aru Sanskritir Abhash*, 2012 : pp4-6

depend on agriculture, arranged for this *puja*. King used to divide work among all the people related to the *puja*. From then onwards depending on the nature of their work different *khel* or *faid* were named. Before that there was no division among Rabhas.

1. **Maitori-** this *khel* or *faid* is entrusted with the job of preparing food and distributing it. *Mae* means rice, and *tori* means to distribute. So this group is called *maitoria*.
2. **Rongdania:** *Rong* means stone *dan* means to carry it in *Khowadh puja*. This *puja* was held in the clear area nearby forest, so to make the altar and to make sitting arrangement, stones are needed. People who were given the responsibility of bringing stones for the above mentioned purposes were called *Romgdania*.
3. **Dahari:** *Dahari* means long bamboo. *Puja* used to be organized at secluded places. So different kinds of birds used to come at that place. One group of people was given the duty of dispersing these birds with the help of these long bamboos. Thus they were called *Dahari*.
4. **Chunga:** to keep wine and water, bamboo tube with one end closed is required. The group responsible for bringing bamboo tube got named as *Chunga*.
5. **Pati:** *Bhog* (food to be offered to deity) to be offered to deity and devotee after the *puja* was offered necessitated leaves of a particular type. Those people who were entrusted with cutting the leaves of trees and arranging for those for distribution of *bhog* are called *Pati*.
6. **Bitoliya:** After *Puja* and offerings were over, there were a section of people who used to entertain the gathering with humorous talk. These people who used to spread humour are called *Bitoliya*.
7. **Koch:** In the ancient time Rabhas were called *Kocha* or *Koch*. Later they were known as Rabhas. During *Khoksi* or *Baikho* worshipping due to geographical or social reasons a section of the tribe could not take part in

the *Puja*. That section remained as *Koch*. Koch Rabhas worship *Runtuk*. It is believed that *Runtuk puja* is the ancient *puja* of the Rabhas.

8. *Totla* : *Totla* means neck (*gol* or *dingi*). During puja pigs were sacrificed. A group was given responsibility of that. They used to kill pig by cutting the neck (*totla*) and got the name *total*.
9. *Hana* : There were a section who used to kill pigs during pujas and other ritualistic ceremonies by piercing with a pointed instrument. This was called *hana* and the group was called *Hana Rabha*.

Among these sub-groups, the *Pati* Rabhas are the most advanced one. This sub-group has accepted Hinduism for all practical purposes. Their main settlements are mainly found in the southern bank in the belt-stretching from Guwahati to Dhudnai. The *pati* Rabhas as well as *Rangdani* and the *Maitory* Rabhas are placed at a higher position socially. The *Pati* Rabhas generally live in the eastern part of the Rabha land. The *Rangdani* Rabhas live in the western part of the territory occupied by the *Pati* Rabhas. The territory of the *Rangdani* Rabhas extends up to the foot-hills. The *Maitori* Rabhas occupy the foot-hills of the Garo ranges and settle in the South-West of Lakhipur. The *Pati* Rabhas bear similarity with the non-tribal Assamese in respect of social and cultural behaviour. It may be mentioned that the *pati* Rabhas have completely forgotten their mother tongue and have accepted Assamese as their spoken and written language. Except the *pati* Rabhas, the other sub-groups of the Rabhas still maintain their language, not of course in the purest form. The *Pati* section is now more Hinduised and the impact of acculturation is more prominent amongst them. They are quite numerous in the Southern bank in the belt stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi (Dr. Das, 1962 in Asomar Janajati-Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1962, p.167). Numerically the *Rangdanie*s are well represented in western Goalpara. The *Maitories* are having relatively lesser numerical strength in Assam than the *Rangdanie*s. They are interspersed with the *Rangdanie*s but their main concentration is western Meghalaya followed by Panchatantra area of Goalpara. Although both the section communicates with the same mother tongue, the *Rangdanie*s appear to be less conservative in outlook than the *Maitories*. Some

other lesser represented sub- groups of the tribe are- Dahuri and *Totla* in Assam plains. The *Dahuri* is to be seen in North Goalpara and the *Totlas* in North Kamrup area and in the northern belt of Darrang district particularly around Rowta, Udalguri and Hugrajuli.

3.1.2 Physical Appearance

In his ethnographic note on the Rabhas incorporated in the Census Report of 1911, J.E. Friend-Pereira had given a very poetic description about the physical features of this tribe as follows: "in general appearance, the Rabhas show all the characteristics of the Mongolian stock: a round face, flat nose, prominent cheek bones, obliquely set eyes, sallow complexion, coarse hair, scanty beard and well developed lower extremities."(Bordoloi et al, 121) The physical features as mentioned above may not be found in the same degree more particularly in regard to the *Pati* section of the tribe, but the general features described by Friend-Pereira more or less hold good still now so far as other sub groups are concerned.

3.1.3 Dwellings and Livelihood Pattern

The Rabhas like to live in compact blocks comprising of 50 to 100 families in each block. Usually the dwellings of a Rabha household consist of four houses-one main house, one guest house, one outer house for the adult family members and a fourth one for using as a cook-shed. In addition to these, cow-shed, a granary and a poultry house if possible are separately constructed. The main house where the head of the family resides is constructed in the northern side of the courtyard maintaining its length in east -west direction. Facing immediately this is the "*Batghar*" or the guesthouse- the courtyard being in between the two. The other two houses are constructed usually facing each other. In some *Rangdani* villages only one living house stretching often from 13 to 15 metres in length is constructed which however is divided into three compartments known as '*Noksrab*' "*Tograb*" and "*Rosinok*" in order from east to west. The first compartment is used as the bed room of the head of the family, the second compartment as the bed for other family members including guests and

the last one is used as the cook-shed. But with the increasing urbanization of the villages, the basic characteristics of the Rabha houses are in the process of rapid change and we can notice constructions in the modern style in the Rabha villages as well.

Like all other plains tribes, the Rabhas also derive their livelihood mainly from agriculture. They undertake cultivation of both Ahu and Sali along with some amount of pulses, mustard seeds and jute. Those who reside in the bordering areas with Meghalaya resort to shifting cultivation to a certain extent.

Rice is the staple food of the tribe with an inherent liking for dried and powdered fish, pork and rice-beer. But those members of the *Pati* Rabhas who got themselves initiated into the Mahapurusiya sect and those who follow Chaitanya sect of the Vaishnavite School no longer indulge in pork and rice-beer.

The Rabha women are expert both in spinning and weaving and seem to be more active than their men folk. Normally they manage their apparels including those used by males. The women's dresses consist mainly of '*Rifan*' '*Kambung*' and '*Khodabang*' which are invariably needed for attiring a bride at the time of her marriage. The male dresses consist of '*Pajal*', '*Khase*', '*Fali*', '*Buksil*', '*Passa*' etc. Among these male dresses the '*Passra*' or '*Passa*' is made out of *endi* yarn while the rest are made out of fine cotton. (Bordoloi et al, p.123)

The weaving excellence of Rabha women is further testified by their intense knowledge in dyeing yarn purely by indigenous process. It appears that weaving is not only a secondary source of livelihood to a Rabha woman but a part and parcel of her material culture. In the same way the Rabha women are quite familiar with various styles of designing. The '*Bahurangi*' songs of the Rabha tribe contain sufficient references as to the competence of the Rabha women in spinning and weaving magical apparels with floral designs that can help in winning civil and criminal cases. In their own terminology these designs are known as '*Mokdamma Ful*'³.

3. Rabha, Mani. "*Asomiya Sanskritiloi Rabhasakalar Abadan*" pub. In the souvenir of the "Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha", 1st session: Boko, 1981

3.1.4 Social Life and Institutions

Although at present the Rabhas follow the patriarchal system of family structure, there are good reasons to believe that they were once a matriarchal tribe. Even today they trace the line of descent through the females and the children after marriage are inducted into the mother's clan. According to Bhubin Rabha (68, Manikpur, Loharghat, South Kamrup), a retired teacher and an active researcher in the field of Folklore, Rabhas are Mongoloid, and among non-Aryans the system of keeping the son-in-law at the in-laws- place was prevalent in the earlier period (*ghar-juwai*). But now a days that system is no longer in use in the society if not extinct totally.

Rabhas use the mother's *barai*⁴ as their title which shows that matrilineal trait is present among the tribe. But compared to other matrilineal tribes like Garos and Khasis, situation here is not the same. Matrilineal strain is only observed in accepting the mother's clan by the children; otherwise they have shifted to following Patriarchal way of life. Thus women do not have the property right among the Rabhas.

The basic structure of the social life of the Rabhas is governed by oral or written ethnological ideas current among them. The most outstanding feature of the social life of the Rabhas is the existence of the documented customary law called "*pandulipis*". These *pandulipis* drafted on the basis of several rounds of discussions among the Rabha people themselves covering all the socio-religious, political and judicial matter such as trial of cases and dispensation of justice, laws and rules of inheritance, succession to the office of the traditional village functionaries, rules regulating the different types of marriages, crimes, punishments and atonements, rules regulating the birth and death rite, taboos, customs, traditions etc. Since the Rabhas have different sections among them and they live in different pockets and zones, these *pandulipis* do not have uniform characteristics and these are always marked by regional variations. As per their customary law of inheritance all sons are entitled to get a share of the father's

4. A 'barai' is alternatively called 'bar'/'housug', which is equivalent to 'gotra' in Assamese, Tribes of Assam part-1, p-131

property. A daughter generally does not inherit father's property. However the father could arrange a share for her before his death.

3.1.5 Marriage

The Rabhas are exogamous. No marriage can take place between the boy and a girl belonging to the same "*Mahari*" or "*Barai*". A younger brother can marry the widow of his elder brother. Cross cousin marriage is permitted but it is not preferred. The system of parallel cousin marriage is totally absent but two brothers of a family can marry from the same family provided the elder brother chooses to marry the elder sister. Child marriage is unknown to them. By and large the Rabhas are monogamous and divorce as well as widow remarriages are allowed.

In the past the Rabhas followed a marriage system called *Kilang* in which the boy was required to stay at the girl's house. All the properties belonged to the female head. The household properties were inherited by the daughters. But the situation has changed over the years. Generally a Rabha marriage proceeds through certain ceremonies. They are *tamul Kata*, *chira bhar*, *ghar kubal or jurun*, *biya and ghar phira*. At first a few elderly women relatives of the boy visit the girl's family with a marriage proposal (*tamul kata*). After a few days a second step called *chira bhar* is undertaken. The boy's relatives will come with a packet of flattened rice mixed with rice-cripsies to the girl's house. The parents of the girl may or may not accept the offer. If the offered item is not returned by the following day it is presumed that the marriage proposal is accepted. It will be followed by another ceremony called *Juran* where the girl is presented with some clothes and ornaments. On the day of the marriage the groom party with all the necessary items will come to the bride's house. The boy's side is required to pay the bride price along with the fees and fines levied by the village concerned. The marriage function is held at the house of the bridegroom. The last ceremony related to marriage is *ghar phira* where the girl's parents invite the new couple for the first time and offer a public feast to complement the occasion. According to informant Bhubin Rabha (68) regarding marriage the system was such that if someone wants a bride or a daughter-in-law, the groom's family members would

visit the girl's place with two bottles of wine. If the girl agrees to the proposal then the girl's parents would accept the bottles and marriage will be fixed. Thus it shows that women have better position as they had the power to accept or reject a proposal. But now this system is rarely in use.

Dowry is unheard of in Rabha society till date. Earlier it was the girl's parents who used to demand bride price and the boy's family used to pay for it. But again this practice is also not in use anymore.

H.K. Rabha in his article "women in the Rabha Plains Tribal Society of Assam" observed that the existence of a functional group called *baro mahari* attached to a marriage is quite peculiar to a Rabha society. It is a group of both male and female members who are relatives in the female line. The main task of this group is to safeguard the interest of the womenfolk. The next day of the marriage the *nokswami* or the bride party ventures to appoint a *patiroap* or *dharmiya oap* or a sacred bond father, to look after the girl in her in-laws house. In case of torture of the wife by her husband, the *baro mahari* takes offence and appropriate measures are taken. One pair of *jati kharu* (made of conch shell) and mark of vermilion is indispensable in a Rabha marriage and the wife maintains it at all costs. But if the husband happens to break the *jati kharu* in the course of torturing her, it is considered a great offence and the case is referred to the *baro mahari* court. In the same way weaving is an essential part of a girl's education and an inseparable part of their culture. The husband must not destroy the loom with half woven clothes of his wife. This is another kind of serious offence. A *baro mahari* day is not only severe but also defamable. Nobody in the Rabha society is ready to earn such a bad name. But now a days the influence of the *baro mahari* group has been reduced to a great extent.

3.1.6 Occupation

The primary occupation of the Rabhas is agriculture. They are settled cultivators and their mode of cultivation is similar to that of the other non-tribal cultivators in the plains districts of Assam. Live-stock rearing, sericulture, manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods etc. are some of their subsidiary occupations. In the agricultural pursuits both men and women are equal partners.

Rabha women are expert weavers and family requirement of clothes is met from family looms.

3.1.7 Religious Outlook

Mr. Friend-Pereira in his Ethnographic Notes on the Rabhas (as incorporated in 1911 Census Report) has termed the Rabhas as animists in their religious outlook. That the basis of their religious philosophy is mainly based on animism can not be denied even today, though under the influence of Hinduism a considerable number of *Pati* Rabhas have already assimilated with the neighbouring Hindu culture and have began to take part in all religious festivals like the *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Shiva Puja* etc. From this we can notice that there are followers of both Saivism and Saktism, over and above their adherence to traditional faith in animism. Again emergence of the *Chaitanya* sect of the Vaishnavite cult⁵ among some of the members of the tribe is prominent along with the adoption of Christianity by a section of the tribe. This process of conversion to Christianity is distinctly visible in the Loharghat and Rani areas of Kamrup district and Dudhnoi in Goalpara district.

3.1.8 Festivals

Among the community religious festivals the *Baikho Puja*, meaning the worship of the goddess of wealth and prosperity, *Langa Puja* or the worship of Lord Mahadeva, propitiation of goddess *Kechai-Khanti*, the deity which protects the humanity and controls evil spirits and *Marai Puja*, meaning the propitiation of goddess *Manasa* (serpent goddess) etc. are the most important ones. A folk dance known as "*Hanaghora*" is yet another occasion of much merriment among the *Pati* Rabhas living in the South-western part of Kamrup district. With the joining of the Bodos and the Garos living in that area, the programme assumes to be a multi-ethnic one. Although primarily a cultural festival, it has ritualistic elements also. The dance programme is simultaneously instituted with the *Rangali Bihu* festival that starts from mid April onwards every year.

5. Nital Ch. Rabha, 64 of Village Bardamal, Balijana Block, Dist. Goalpara, a follower of this Vaishnavite cult informed that in their village itself, there are 15 families of this cult. Pankaj Rabha(25) his son added that this section has given up traditional rice-beer and pork. They opted for vegetarian food.

3.1.9 Rabha Literature

Like the other ethnic tribal groups of the NE India and Assam, the Rabha tribe also has their own distinct language, literature and culture, which they express through mythology, folk songs, ballads, folk tales, proverbs, riddles, sayings and charms etc. 'the Rabha language' says B. Das, 'is fast dying out and meagre data on their language are found to exist'. The *Pati* Rabhas have already accepted the Assamese language. Similarly the *Rangdani* and the *Maitori* Rabhas have also accepted the Assamese language. Other groups of Rabhas, however, preserve their language to some extent. Attempts have started to standardize the Rabha language and to impart education at the primary level particularly in the schools of the Rabha dominated area.

3.1.10 Women in Rabha Society

The Rabha women are very hard working which can be observed in their day to day life which starts in the early morning and ends late at night. A woman in the Rabha society observes every caution in handling the household chores. She will take a bath before entering the kitchen where the family deity "runtuk" is kept. Her duty includes fetching firewood, draw water, cook food, and brew the rice beer besides working in the fields and weaving clothes at home. She also requires cleaning the utensils, husking the paddy and doing such other work. She prepares *bakhar* or yeast; a fermentation agent used in brewing liquor and also produces *khar* (home made alkali) to preserve for the whole year. Like other tribal women of Assam, they dry meat, fish and vegetables and keep it for future use. Rabha women also rear pigs and fowls.

With the changing time, the sphere of activities of Rabha women has increased and they are also shouldering greater responsibilities in both their public and private affairs. In spite of all these development and change which is creeping in the tribal societies and also influencing women and their life style in a major way, it is also a fact that Rabha women are still facing a lot of disabilities; they are still in the firm grip of superstitions. They worship the spirits and believe in supernatural powers. The expression "kun *bilat singi nai*" meaning there is a witch in every village reveals their tremendous belief in witchcraft. A witch is

called *daini* who can by dint of her magical power separate her head portion from the body and go out for a night adventure. The gaze of the *daini* can cause a lot of misery to the people and therefore it has to be avoided. There are women *shamans* who will go into a trance and speak about the coming events. Surprisingly this kind of superstitious belief is still prevalent in the society. During my field study on July 25 and 26 2011 at village Bardamal, under Balijana block, dist. Goalpara, Mrs. Renuka Rabha, 54, advisor, Mechpara Purbanchal Rabha Mahila Samiti, informed us that women are still harassed, tortured and even killed, terming them as *dainis* for practicing witch craft. Framing a woman as *daini* and the prevalent belief and practice of witch craft is the result of illiteracy among the tribal people. This social menace can only be handled through spread of education.

According to my informant Bhubin Rabha, (68, school teacher, Manikpur, Loharghat, South Kamrup) the tradition of witch craft and witch hunting along with its influence is still very much prevalent among tradition bound conservative Rabha societies. He cited two examples of witch hunting in South Kamrup area which were fairly recent. One incident happened in Aliha near Loharghat where a woman was killed and another happened in Rajapara where a couple was brutally killed. According Mr. Rabha practices like this continue to prevail in society because in the interior villages people still believe in *ojha* (exorcist, incantator) and *bez* (practitioner who treats patients by enchanting mantras and giving medicines as well) and magic to cure different ailment and problems. A section of the people, in order to exert and sustain their influence in the society, to take revenge on their enemy or to fulfill some personal interest or sometimes to sort out some property dispute or to annex someone's property resort to the campaign of terming someone as witch and instigate people against them. If the person (sometimes a woman and at times a couple) does not appear submissive in front of the society, once accusation is leveled against them, they were killed. But there is also an instance where chance is not given to the accused to prove innocence. When asked Mr. Rabha lamented that the belief is so deep rooted that in the society that even educated person also believe in that and take lead in sustaining and perpetuating such belief.

3.2 THE GAROS

The Garos, a matrilineal tribe of North-Eastern India, live predominantly in the districts of East and West Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Goalpara, South Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam. Garos are traditionally shifting cultivators in their settlement in the Hills. Like all tribal societies, the Garos have also certain social institutions to form, guide and control the cohesive structure of family kinship and social relations among the clans within their respective territorial jurisdictions. We do not have much written document to understand the Garo political system before the British rule. In these matter folktales, traditional customs and practices, and later British reports gave us some idea about the self governing institutions of the Garos. The early British writers like John Elliot (1789), Francis Hamilton (1814), Captain Reynolds (1849), Moffat Mills (1853) and others reported the existence of the Garo Rajas in the hills and plains of Assam and Bengal. But they did not evaluate or measure the kind of authority exercised by those '*rajas*' over their respective "*kingdoms*." (Kar 1982, p2)

The Garo Hills is the abode not only of the Garos but also of the Koches, Rabhas, Hajongs, Baniyas and others. But the Garos settled there as a compact group. If the Garo language is believed to be separated from the original Bodo speech about 2000 years ago it may be presumed that their compact settlements in the hills might have stretched for at least 2000 years, if not for more. Several folktales that tell of the itinerary of the Garos from Tibet to the Garo Hills along the banks of Brahmaputra and through the tracts of Bhutan and Coach Behar and Dhubri referred to the leaders to the of the wandering Garos as rajas, and suggested that the matriliney had been adopted by the society after their entry into the present districts of Goalpara and Garo Hills. Here it is relevant to mention one folktale that I have gathered from Julius Sangma, (65) from Ranibari area of South Kamrup, a village inhabited by Garos. The story goes like this-

They were three sisters. The youngest one was adopted. The eldest one was Garo, the middle one was Bodo who was exchanged for banana plant, in order to cross the mighty Brahmaputra and the youngest one who was adopted was brought along with them from Tibet is Raba or Rabha (meaning brought

along). These three sisters are the ancestral mothers of Garos, Bodos and Rabhas. There are similarities between these three tribes. They had come from the same region, Tibet and linguistically also there are a lot of similarities (Tibeto-Burman family). They came from Tibet to Kamakhya situated at Nilachal Hill and worshipped different God and Goddesses, and came down to Durga Sarovar in order to settle there. At Durga sarovar they could not settle for too long with the non-tribals. From Durga Sarovar they spread to different areas like Langkona, Kinangaon, Nisan Gram etc.

There was a saying that a Garo builds his house once. He does not go for repairing because due to his occupation of Jhum cultivation he needs to shift again and again. They built it afresh in a new place every time they move. But now a day this trend is changing. With education, scarcity of land and change of occupation, people are building permanent houses instead of constantly being on the move. But according to informant Julius N. Sangma, *jhum* Cultivation is still prevalent in the Shantipur area. People still shift but majority of them have settled permanently.

The mythology handed down from time immemorial to the present generation and recorded in the recent period by a few Garo scholars from narration of bards from all over the land inhabited by the Garos, women occupies an important position and figures frequently in the tales. Nostu Nopantu, a goddess, is said to have given birth to the earth in the sense that she gave shape to it.

Wangala, the most traditional festival of the Garos, owes its origin to an extremely poor widow called Ae who's pure and untainted heart and whose act of burning incense to welcome the stranger, the god Misi Saljong, won the blessings of the latter.

In the myths women enjoy so much respect that an insult to a woman can cause conflict and war. In legends women are portrayed as pure, beautiful, brave, noble and faithful wives. In the history of the tribe women figure prominently though they did not assume leadership during the course of their wanderings from Tibet to their present homeland. They lent active support to men folk in their

numerous conflicts and at times they took part in warfare. Women are also respected as progenitresses of the clans of the tribe.

System of matriliney as practiced by the Garos has been analyzed by Dr. D.N. Majumder (cited in Marak's "Status of Women in Garo Culture") as follows:

The hallmark of the Garo society is matriliney. Matriliney permeates the whole society. Descent is matrilineal, inheritance is through the females, residence after marriage is uxorilocal, and so on. Clan affiliation among the Garos is determined through the mother and paternal line is almost ignored in their kinship system....the matrilineal kinship system of the Garos has given rise to a structure of joint families based on uxorilocal residence. Garo lineages are based on traceable blood relationship through female and Garo clans are based on the belief that all members of the clan are related through blood in the female line. In Garo society the kinship group is the basic group which can be considered as the unit of intimate social, economic and to some extent political relationship. The Garos select one of their daughters (not necessarily the youngest or the oldest) to inherit their property. The daughter nominated by the parents to be the inheritress is to stay permanently in the parental household after her marriage and thus, she, along with her husband is expected to look after the property as well as the parents in their old age. As the inheritress is a member of her mother's lineage and as the father belongs to an entirely different lineage, it is necessary that the resident son-in-law belongs to the principal male of the household's lineage, preferably a close relation of his. This has given rise to the system of bringing one's own sister's son as the resident son in law of the household. After the death of the older couple, the younger couple inherits the property of the household and thus becomes the owner of the household.

(Majumdar, 307-8)

This system of bringing in the husband's nephew into the household as the resident son in law to continue the male lineage is known as the law of Akim. By this law, on the death of a spouse, a relative –male or female as the case may be – is to be given in marriage to the widow or the widower. This law affects both men and women adversely. When a suitable adult relative of the deceased is

not found children are forced into marrying the much older survivor. Women may be said to be the worst sufferers in such situations. On the question of compulsion, the female relatives of the girl have no say at all; they allow the custom to take its course without considering its merits and remain silent spectators. This custom had been in practice in urban as well as rural areas, among the educated as well as the illiterate. When a young man is given in marriage to a widow with a daughter to succeed his deceased male relative, the daughter is promised as his second wife. This custom of giving the daughter of the first marriage as second wife is known as *dokchapa*. This custom is still in use among the non-Christians:

Though a Garo women's status is normally believed to be much better than her counterparts in patriarchal societies, her position has not been favourably affected by the matrilineal set up. As usual power rests with the males and the *mahari* or the closely related members of a clan including those who married into the clan. Though women inherit property, she does not exercise exclusive right over it and her husband has the final say in exercising authority over household possessions as well as landed property. There are instances when a *nokkrom* or resident son-in law squanders the family possession and property and ruins the family fortune while the wife remains a silent spectator. Polygamy is practiced with the consent of the principal wife and her *chras*. The fact that Garo women have no voice in determining their own fate has been stated by Dr. D.N. Majumdar (cited in Marak's "Status of Women in Garo Culture") thus:

In the affairs of the mahari the women have no voice at all. Such matters are exclusively decided by the male elders...and as males do not consider the opinion of women in such matters necessary, there is no way for the women to influence the mahari affairs, except through their husbands. Even regarding matters concerning women, the opinion of the women concerned or all the women in general of the mahari is not considered as essential. Women must abide by the decision of the male elders. Marriages are settled by the mahari and the opinion of the girl is not considered significant.

(Majumdar, 60-61)

The position of the *nokna* or the heiress of the *aking* which means a large area of land belonging to a particular clan is hardly any better. On her behalf the

land is managed solely by her husband. Though the husband wields immense power, he has to get the consent of his wife on various issues including the sale of property and land. The *chras* of the *nokna* (heiress) can object to any misuse of power. In case of litigation, the *nokna* stops coming to the courts of law once formalities have been completed; the *chras* represent her in subsequent appearances.

Each Garo assumes himself or herself to be a member of one of the five divisions based on matrilineal descent. These are exogenous by rule of marriage. Out of these five, the three divisions namely Sangma, Momin and Marak are prominent due to their large size and wide territorial dispersal. Each sociolinguistic subdivision is known by its expertise in certain skill. The Garo marriage, customary usages and practices associated with it reflect the dynamics of socio cultural changes. The nubile girl takes the initiative in matrimonial alliances. It is her prerogative to initiate the decision making process. In this matter she is helped by the members of her *chra* (matrilineal kins). On the other hand bride's father consolidates his hold through *akim* rules which make it obligatory to accept his sister's own or related son as *nokrom* of his family. The ideal Garo union is between adults belonging to different *machong* or *mahari* (clan). In preferential category, mother's brother's daughter is an ideal mate to continue the *nokchame* relation in perpetuity. Polygamy is not forbidden. But choice of wives is restricted to sisters of first wife's family. There is no dowry system among the Garos. The expenses of feast and other ceremonies are borne by bride's *mahari*.

Garo society being matrilineal in nature, the inheritance is through female line that is from the mother to a daughter. The heiress remains in her natal home with her husband (*nokrom*). The non-heiress daughters (*agate*) establish separate households after marriage either in their natal village or elsewhere. The rights over land are held by *mahari* members of heiress although land resources are managed by *nokrom*. He cannot sell the land without the consent of members of his wife's *machong*. Similarly a man after marriage doesnot abandons relations with members of his own *mahari* and *machong*. He continues to supervise and manage matters of his female relatives, which is, mother, mother's sister, cousin

sisters and nieces. He depends on his matrilineal relatives in case of help in any emergency. Such dependency is reflected in a Garo proverb '*mana nona ok:jkna dena kok*'. The free translation runs like this 'my stomach is for my mother and sisters while my basket is for my wife and children'. This proverb effectively summarizes that as a son or a brother, the man is at liberty to satisfy his hunger in his mother's or sister's home but he does not feel free to satisfy his hunger in his wife's and children's households for whose prosperity he toils hard.

As far as who becomes a *Nokna* (the heiress), there is a difference between Garo Hills and Assam. In the two districts of Kamrup and Goalpara, a *Nokna* is the eldest daughter of the family where as in Garo Hills a *Nokna* is the youngest daughter of the family. But in some cases the heiress becomes the one whom the parents consider as most eligible among many daughters.

They can be neither a widow or widower since Garo customary practices make provision for *onsong* and *onga* that is remarriage of widow and widower. A widowed-mother-in-law among the Garos is supposed to be married by her son-in-law who is the *Nokrom*. The structural importance of this marriage is far more than the biological one. The *Nokrom* has to become the head of the family, after the death of his father-in-law; he must marry, as a custom, the owner of the property who is still his mother-in-law. The headship of the family is connected with marriage to the owner of the property. In case the widowed mother-in-law marries someone outside, the *Nokrom* will lose the authority of the family and the *Nokna* may not get the property in her mother's life time. So in order to get the ownership of property for his wife and the authority and headship of the family for himself the *Nokrom* marries the widowed mother-in-law. This custom gives social security to the widowed mother-in-law who under the norms becomes the principal wife and her daughter the secondary one till the death of her mother. Thus a Garo woman is always secured economically and socially under the matrilocal and matrilineal social set up. If a widow has no daughter she is expected to adopt one from suitable relatives and is obligatory on her part to marry this adopted daughter's husband. This is locally referred as *onsong onga* literally meaning replacement marriage. In case the widowed mother-in-law refuses to marry her heiress daughter's husband, that is, her own son-in-law, she

forfeits the right to exercise authority over property and latter passes to her heiress daughter during former's life time. Such marriage between sons-in-law is a necessity since an heiress daughter can not acquire the rights of property as long as her mother is alive and moreover the property affairs should be managed by a man married to the owner of the property. Thus this form of marriage ensures continuity of male managerial ship. The husbands of non-heiress daughters or agate have no such obligation. Furthermore such son-in-laws are strictly abstained from entering a matrimonial bond with their mother-in-law. In the South Kamrup area of Assam, the area of my study and also the area of Garo concentration, almost all the Garos have taken Christianity. And with Christianity and spread of education the marriage between the widowed mother-in-law and the son in-law has long become a dying custom. New generation of Garos have not even heard of this custom.

Though monogamous marriages are preferred, polygamy is a common feature among the Garos. Sometimes the man is compelled to go for polygamous union with his wife and mother in law as co-wives in case of the death of the father-in-law. Otherwise also most of the Garo women do not have any problem with polygamy if their husbands want that. Moreover if the husband is energetic and financially sound with a bigger *jhum* cultivation he is easily given permission to have an additional wife. Here the permission of the first wife is a must to secure the additional wife. All the wives share a common house and all the additional wives need to obey the eldest wife who is considered principal wife and owner of the property, and only her daughter is eligible to become *Nokna*. Plurality of wives, among Garos is sometimes considered a symbol of higher status of man and the additional wives provide more work forces for *Jhum* fields.

3.2.1 Concept of *Machong* and *Mahari*

Machong is too big a body to discharge all these onerous functions especially when the members of a *machong* may be spread over different distant areas. The Garos have, therefore, their own scheme of carrying out the *machong* responsibilities by a smaller group of kins, closely related by common motherhood, called *mahari* of the husband or wife of the household. The concept

of *mahari* has two fold expressions: as a consanguineous unit in relation to a member of a household, and as a functional unit in respect of that household (Kar 1982, p8). The consanguineous unit of a *mahari* refers to a smaller body of the closer matri-relations, male or female, of a household member in which the male matri-relations (*Chra*) predominate. Thus the consanguineous mahari of the husband consists of his mother, sister, maternal uncles and aunts, etc.

The functional unit of the *mahari* is conceived in reference to a household and not to a member as such. It means an effective group of persons closely related by marriage, formed for the maintenance of a household and for its continuity as a socio-economic institution. Thus the functional *mahari* of a household consists of the consanguinals of its principal female and her affinals like the principal male, and the husband of her inheritress daughter (*nokrom*). For all practical purposes the close consanguinals of the principal female of the household, its male head and the *nokrom* form the composite character of the functional *mahari*. Here we find the representation of the two *machongs*, that of the principal female and of the principal male, accompanying the marriage and forming the household. The focal point of power has, however been the *chra* or the male matri relations of the principal female of the household.

The role of the household head and the *nokrom* cannot be underestimated because of the overriding power of the *chra* in a functional *mahari*. Without the former, a family or a household cannot be initiated and its continuity also cannot be conceived unless as a reflex of the *a'kim* in which the machong of the household head and its *nokrom* (nephew of the former) is equally involved with that of the principal female and her *nokna*.

In case of each of the household, inheritance passes from the mother to the chosen daughter, and ideally never gets diffused. The household head acts as the custodian of the household property. These managerial and custodial responsibilities are handed down to his nephew as the *nokrom* of the household. A family or household is thus the confluence of the representations, responsibilities and the projections of two *machongs* that form the family or the household.

The term *nokma* has come to be used in several senses. The principal female of the senior most household and its head are generally referred to as *nokma* (Kar 1982:11). A man with riches, and a man performing a ceremony for acquiring social prestige and status in exchange of lavish feasts are known or referred to as *Gamni Nokma* and *Gana Nokma* respectively. There are *Chalang* and *miteni* *nokma* also. But none compares well with the *nokma* of the *a'khing* (referred as *a'khing nokma*). He administers the political, social and economic life of the people as a custodian, religious head and the highest executive of the *a'khing* and he does it with the advice of the *a'khing* elders.

A long tradition endows him with certain rights and privileges. It was under the auspices of the *nokma* that the lands for *jhuming* used to be distributed among the households of the *a'khing*. Certain common functions were to be discharged by the pooling of labour resources from all the household of the *a'khing*. This contribution of labour power by the households assumed the character of periodic taxation for works of common benefit like the cleaning and construction of roads and paths, *nokpantes* (bachelor-house), organization of village festivals, preparation and burning of *jhum* site for the first term and others, under the administration of the *a'khing-nokma*.

As a religious head, he has the privilege of initiating a village or community festival in his own house as the residence of the senior most household of the *a'khing*. No household can precede the *nokma* household in inaugurating certain ceremonies either in the village or in the *jhum* fields. No household can possess 'Nagra' or a special drum except the *nokma*-household that can only arrange for a special ceremony and sacrifice for making it. Nobody can perform *Gana ceremony* for wearing an elbow ring as a symbol of social status without the previous permission of the *a'khing-nokma*.

The *a'khing nokma* is also responsible for maintaining peace and order within the *a'khing* and defend the same against external aggression. It also appears that there are no legislative or judicial organs in the *a'khing*. The functions of both the organs were discharged by the *nokma* with the common consent of the *a'khing* elders and his council of advisors.

The *nokma* has to conduct the proceedings of the council of *akhing*-elders in settling the intra- *a'khing* disputes. But he never tries to impose his own views on the witnesses or on the contestants. He does much of the questioning and interrogations and provokes the participants for more information and comments.

The traditional Garo society has developed certain norms of behaviour in their intra-familial and inter-familial relations based on matrilineal kin groups, and these are followed with implicit regularity. A Garo always observes a code of conduct that abhors all acts that may injure the feelings of any person and honours those that maintain or restore peace therein. "Unlawful acts are felt to be wrong not because they violate or infringe on a moral precept but because these hurt some particular person or damage an individual's reputation or feelings".

Every Garo regards himself a constituent of a kin group, *mahari* or *machong* which has an inherent obligation of looking after the interest and prestige of its own members. Their concept of right or wrong generally concerns the individuals, and through them their respective *maharis* are involved.

The principle of reciprocity is always held in highest esteem in all their social and economic activities. Political activities are not an exception to this rule. Every action good or bad has to be reciprocated by a similar action. Murder was to be retaliated by murder in the older days, and the mutual revenges were carried down the generations. The mode of settling such a dispute was by inducing the injured party or *mahari* to accept *dai* (compensation) as the price of blood. (Hamilton: 1814:19, in Kar,1982, p17)

The Garos have developed an institution to train up their young people as good citizens of the *a'khing*-polity. It is called *nokpan* which literally means the house of the bachelors, and is found in every village or *a'khing*. All the bachelors of the village have to sleep therein and pass their leisure time in and around *nokpante*. Drums, gongs, feathers of fowls, horns of cattle and other public properties of the village are to be kept in the *nokpante*. Under the leadership of the senior man of the village, young people were to learn the various arts and crafts in respect of cane, wood and bamboo works, and thus to excel in the making of nets, mats and baskets of various sizes and uses. Beating of drums, and

gongs, playing on flutes, harps and reeds, and dances for various festivals also used to be practiced in and around the *nokpante*. Besides, the village elders meet here for deliberations and decisions on things of interest.

The entry of ladies to a *nokpante* is, however, strictly regulated. Girls had no such common institution for their training, and were to grow up in the company of their parents and married elders. The latter gave the former training in all possible fields and household works. The *nokpante* was always set up in a strategic position of the village or the *a'khing* so that the entire body of young men of the area could be pressed to service in any emergency situation. It was also the place where the art of warfare was taught to the young bachelors and teaches them the spirit of co-operation. A village may have more than one dormitory each belonging to a particular lineage group.

3.2.2 Influence of Christianity and Education on Garo Society

Christianity and education brought a change in the life of a Garo woman plagued by different impediments to their development in the traditional way of life. With the establishment of a Christian Mission in 1867 specially designated for the Garos, which established schools while spreading religion.

But Christian churches left untouched those social customs which did not clash with Christian tenets. Polygamy and *dokchapa* became illegal for Christians, but the law of *akim* still held good in so far as a successor had to be provided to a widow or a widower. This custom still continued to plague the Garos, especially, women, till the recent period in both urban and rural areas. As has been already mentioned, acquisition of high education by women had undermined the power of the *chras* and forcible marriages are becoming very rare. In some *mahari* meetings, women's opinions are sought for; they are entrusted with almost equal responsibilities as men.

Education has brought about a revolution in women's world and their status. Her world broadened to include other lands, people and cultures and her experiences widened to an unprecedented degree. Her success in the out side world has also brought her liberation from repression and tyranny. An educated woman has a career and other aims besides marriage. Economic independence

besides liberating her from tyranny, gave her self esteem. Thus women have been in a better position than even before to fight against prejudices, conservatism and double standards. Traditionally women have been bread winners but now she has firmly established herself as a major source of family income.

Women's low self esteem in the past is evident in the submissive, self-abasing tone in which they used to approach men of their choice. The expression "to live under the shade (protection) of your love" where a man was compared to a tree, was a common phrase. It has been observed that women's self image has now vastly improved.

The epic lore of Garo has abundance of poems, folktales and folksongs describing their beautiful land, valour of brave men and beauty of damsels. The songsarek Garo are link between tradition and modernity.

The contemporary Garo society has undergone multi dimensional changes in time and space. The eleven territorial divisions with distinct dialectical and cultural variations are now almost indistinguishable. In spite of the customary sanctions against rules of exogamy the cases of breaches of such customary practices are on the increase and society is gradually tolerating these instances. Education, employment, spread of Christianity, industrialization, urbanization and exposure to other forces of change made impact on Garo social institution too. Due to the shift in economy and social mobility the supervisory control of machong is gradually being diminished over such families who migrated near the growing urban centres in search of better life. However the basics of Garo society such as clan, sub clan, solidarity, cohesiveness which regulate marriage alliances and control family life remain unchanged. (Roy, Shibani and S.H.M.Rizvi- "Revaluating tribes of North East India" Vanyajati, 1987, 35:2-12)

3.2.3 Status of Women in Garo Society

Garo being matrilocal and matrilineal society it has its own repercussions on the status of its women. After marriage it is the husband who shifts to wife's house. In case of heiress the husband stays in the house of his parents-in-law. In case of a non-heiress, the husband shifts to the new house with his wife, in wife's village only. Thus the wife stays on in familiar atmosphere as she does not shift

to her husbands' parental home. Psychologically she is secured and is not obliged to accommodate the so called hostile relations of husbands. A Garo girl grows up in a very congenial and intimate atmosphere with no inhibition of any kind. A girl child freely roams about in the village and Jhum fields and enjoys all the pre-marital liberties. By the time a girl reaches puberty she is supposed to learn all the household works independently and to help her mother in household work as well as in *jhum* fields. Puberty does not mean any special occasion for the Garo. It comes naturally and the girl is considered eligible for marriage after attaining puberty. After marriage too she is in a convenient position as she continues to enjoy the same congenial atmosphere with of course little more strict code of conduct. Matriliney also places a woman at a beneficial plane. She inherits all the marital property and her house hold is the centre of all religious rituals and ceremonies in which she plays an important role. But it is also a fact that women do not enjoy absolute authority as the husband for all practical purposes is the real manager of property and de facto head of the household.

In her article "status of women in Garo culture", Caroline Marak begins with reference to mythology. In Garo myths women occupy important position and enjoy so much respect that an insult to a woman could cause conflict and war. In legends women are portrayed as pure, beautiful, brave and noble. But in reality, Marak maintains that there is a subjugation of women. The matrilineal system does not protect their position and rights. Although much importance was given to a female child, men dominated and in numerous practical ways were treated as superior to women.

In the matrilineal societies, where the predominance of presumption is towards the existence of an empowered woman in the traditional sense of the term, i.e. her rights to hold property, and hence hold power, the reality presents a picture of institutionalized dispossession and disempowerment. In Garo society, where the society is organized into matrilineal groups known as "*machongs*" or motherhood as the term is roughly construed, it is evident that while inheritance of property is " through mother and restricted to female live and men do not inherit property", the actual exercise of power and authority resides in the 'secured' hands of males in society, i.e., the *Chra-Pnte* or *Chratangrang*

comprising elder and younger brothers of every woman, their maternal uncles (*manatangrang* as they are called) who take upon themselves the “duty” of “initiating and carrying through all works that have to do with religious, civil, criminal and judiciary laws as well as those which regulates marriage and heredity”. This compels us to wonder what is actually left to women to control in a traditional society as Garos. It is evident again that apart from lending her name to the document of title, over her sole means of sustenance i.e., land over any other incidental social or political power and authority that could flow from any such title over predominant means of production.

The fact that in the matrilineal societies like Garos and Khasis, the position of women is merely the custodian of the family property, the principal means of production and wealth in a primordial society vests with the males, i.e., in the likes of the maternal uncles, is observed in recent empirical studies. Further this position has been repeatedly reflected in the judgements of the Gauhati High Court, relying on and applying the Customary Laws exclusively on disputes over property in the Khasi and Jaintia Hill district. In the case of *Mrs. C. Kharkrang vs N. Bagchi & ors* (1995(11) GLT 324) at para 13, their Lordships have observed,

“The custom prevalent in this matrilineal society is that though the property is in the custody of the matrilineal head, *Ka Khadduh* the male members of the family look after the property as manager”.

Thus it is evident that in spite of modernity, the traditional societies in the North Eastern part of India, continues to be under the shadows of customary laws and practices, with regard to the administration of justice. This preponderance of customary laws in its turn has led to the perpetuation of the disadvantaged position that the women faced in these societies since antiquity. Women continue to languish as the marginal in their respective societies. Though comparative analysis with the caste Hindu women in mainland India, at times give the impression of a better status for womenfolk in the region, micro studies of the customary laws of some of the traditional societies give a different picture. The women of this region suffer from being twice dispossessed. By virtue of belonging to the North eastern part of India, they are rendered socially and

politically marginalized in Indian society and polity, added to this is their peripheral status at the traditional power discourses as well.

3.2.4 Appearance

The Garos are not very dark in complexion, but they are darker than the neighbouring Khasis in comparison with Mongolian features prominent in them. Col. Dalton in his 'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal', described Garos: 'their faces are round and short. The forehead is not receding, but projects very little beyond the eye, which is small, on a level with the face, very dark and obliquely set. The want of prominence in the nose is remarkable. The whole face has the appearance of being flattened, the mouth sharing in the compressed appearance and not at all prognathous'. Hair is sometimes straight but more often wavy and even curly.

3.2.5 Physical and General Characteristics

Garos, both men and women are short, the men averaging 5ft ½inch and the women 4ft10inch. Their structure is rather lean and wiry than stout, and a fat man is quite a rarity. They do not exhibit the development of the lower limbs that is, such a feature of, for instance, the Khasis, but an outdoor life and continual climbing up and down the rugged hills has made them hard working and capable of much endurance. Though strong, they are not remarkable as porters, though in the cold season they make long marches to markets with heavy baskets of cotton on their backs. The women are not beautiful, especially when they pass middle age, but when young, they are buxom and healthy in appearance and their good natured smiling faces make them fairly attractive. A great disfigurement is the distension of their ears by the weight of enormous earrings, which often break the lobes in two. The men rarely have hair in their faces. If a moustache is worn, it usually consists of a few hairs on either side of the upper lip, owing to the custom of pulling out the rest.

Garos are friendly and pleasant in manner, and usually exhibit very little trace of shyness. They are honest and fairly truthful. They are also said to be very lazy and it is difficult to make them do a fair task even for good wages. But contrary to this view it is also observed that they are actively involved in felling

trees to clear land, wedding their fields, and bringing their crops to market. Since their requirements were fulfilled by the production of their own fields, they probably did not feel it necessary to work for wages. Except for their passion for drink, the Garos have very few vices. They love to enjoy feast accompanied by singing and dancing. Apart from that they have very few avenues of amusement. They are quiet people and also law abiding.

3.2.6 Geographical Distribution

The Garos may be roughly divided into Hill Garos and Plains Garos, and both classes inhabit the district which owes its name to the tribe (GARO HILLS). Plains Garos are also found in the under mentioned districts-

Mymensingh

Goalpara

Kamrup

Khasi and Jaintia Hills

In the Goalpara district, there are a number of widely scattered Garo villages. Most of these lie close to the Garo Hills border, but others have been established on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra. The inhabitants of these are *Akawés*. In Kamrup, on the border between that district and the Khasi Hills, there exists a colony of Garos known as the *Hana* Garos. According to their own traditions, they are the direct descendants of the Garos who entered Assam in the days of Arambit Raja. They believe that he married the daughter of one of the Garo chiefs, and their daughter, Nini-Hana was their ancestress. According to Mr. Gait the *Hanas* 'are said to be descended from a man who speared an elephant;' in such a case the name would be of Assamese origin. Besides the *Hana* Garos there exist two other divisions in the Kamrup districts, the *Damelia* Garos-who like the *Hanas*, speak the language which is almost exactly the same as *Awé*-and the *Baragharias*, who appear to be more akin to the *Megams*, and have in them and their language a strong admixture of the Khasi element. According to Major Playfair among themselves they prefer the appellation of *A°chik*, which is common to all Garos. But the Kamrup Garos also hold the same belief regarding

their origin as the rest of the tribe, and do not admit that they are descendents from emigrants from the Hills.

3.2.7 Origin

Garos, a name given by alien to refer this tribe became their identity. The origin of the name 'Garos' has been the subject of some conjecture. In the southern portion of the hills there exists a division of the tribe who call themselves Gara or Ganching. These people are not far removed from the Mymensingh district, from which direction the Garos were first approached by Europeans or Bengalis. It is therefore not unlikely that this division of the tribe first received their appellation of Gara that the name was extended to all the inhabitants of the hills, and that in time it became corrupted from *Gara to garo*. Another theory is that, one of the original leaders of the migration was named *Garu*, and that he gave his name to the tribe. In one of their old songs, the country of their origin is referred to as *Garu-a°-song*, or the country of the *Garu*. From the fact that the Garos never use the name except in conversation with a foreigner, but always call themselves *A°chik* (hill man), *Mandé*(the man) or *A°chik mandé*. According to Major Playfair the name Garos is merely a corruption of the name of one of the subdivision of the tribe.

It is believed that the Garos originally migrated from Tibet. Their original place was 'Tarua' or Tibet. They belong to the Tibeto-Chinese family of Tibeto-Burman family of Bodo group. Majority of them are now Christian as compared to Hindu Garos. Geographically the Garos tribes have two divisions: those who inhabit in the hills and those who live in the plains. There are 12 main divisions of the Hill-Garos and about 6 of the plain Garos. Besides being basically geographical, these divisions were made according to certain tasks assigned to them which distinguished their names such as, the *Abengs* were told to pick cotton, the *kochus* to prepare dried fish, the *chiksaks* to collect edible bamboo shoots and so on.

3.2.8 Food

The Garos are fond of any kind of animal food including beef. In their villages they rear goats, pigs, fowls and ducks. Besides these most Hill Garos eat

dogs and cats and every kind of wild animal that they can kill. Again *nakam* or dried fish is highly preferred by the Garos. *Gram* or dried venison or beef is also considered a great delicacy. The liquor which plays so important a part in the daily life of the Garo is always brewed and never distilled. It is prepared from rice, millet, maize or Job's tears.

3.2.9 Language

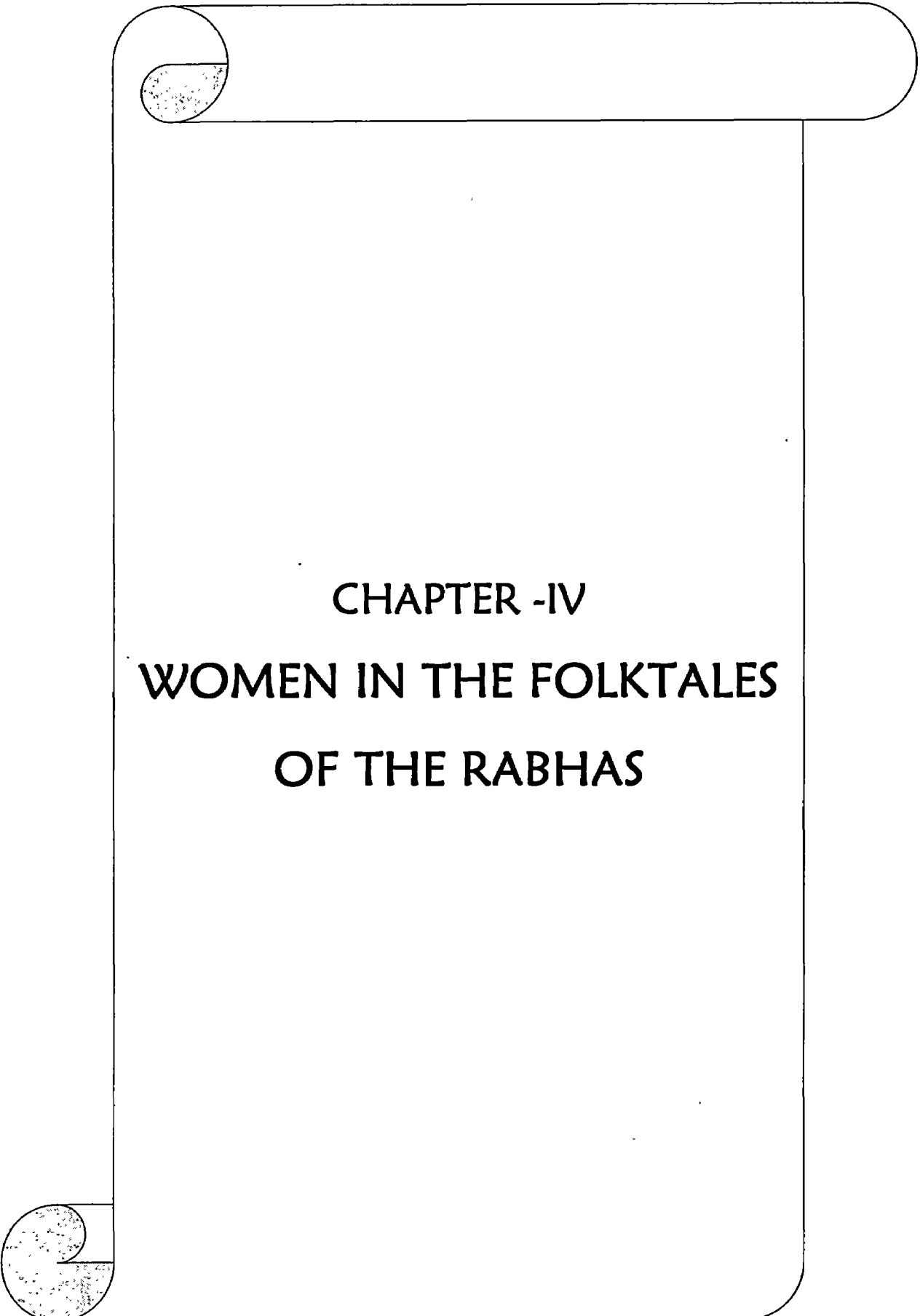
Garo is the language of the majority of the people of the Garo Hills in the Indian state of Meghalaya. Garo is also used in Kamrup, Dhubri, Goalpara and the Darrang districts of Assam. Garo uses the Latin alphabet and has a close affinity to Bodo, the language of one of the dominant communities of Assam.

3.2.10 Garo Women in Assam

While discussing about the status and role of women in Garo society, my informants said that almost all of them have turned Christians over the years, but in their day to day life they are still governed by Garo customary laws and customs. Thus *Mahari* controls their society and *Maharis* exercises tremendous control over their social life. Women's opinions are sought in the *Mahari* discussions but ultimately it is the male members of the Women's *mahari* who calls the shot and decides on important issues. But regarding property dealing, the women's consent is a must.

Adward Steady N. Sangma, Assistant Professor, D.K. College, Mirza, while commenting on women's status in Garo society, observed that apart from possessing the property, woman practically has no such right because the property she owns is handled by the husband or the maternal uncle. Moreover women do all the hard work in their day to day life, from rearing children, managing household chores, going to field, helping in cultivation, etc but they hardly get any acknowledgement for that.

The system of *onsong and onga* (remarriage of widow and widower) is not prevalent in Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam but in Garo Hills this is still in practice. Again Law of *Akim* is still in practice among the *Megam Mahari* in West Garo Hills Districts.



CHAPTER -IV
WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES
OF THE RABHAS

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES OF THE RABHAS

If we look into the culture of the Rabhas who are one of the major ethnic groups of Assam, we find that although at present the Rabhas follow the patriarchal system of family structure there are evidence in their folklore material, particularly in their folktales that they were once a matrilineal tribe. Even today they trace the line of descent through females and children after marriage are inducted into the mother's clan. Goddesses are worshipped in the community religious festivals like *Baikho Puja*, meaning the worship of the goddess of wealth and prosperity, propitiation of goddess *Kechai Khanti*, the deity which protects all humanity and controls the evil spirits and *Marai Puja*, propitiation of goddess *Manasa* (serpent goddess). Child marriages are not practiced by the community and divorce and widow remarriages are allowed in the community. This shows that women are in an advantageous position and enjoy some breathing space and freedom in this tribe. But we also have to mention the fact that as per their customary law of inheritance all sons are entitled to get a share of the father's property whereas a daughter generally gets none of this unless her father arranges a share for her before his death. The presence of matrilineal clans in their patriarchal society theoretically provides considerable importance to women among Rabhas in comparison to other tribal women (Bordoloi, 1987). However it is not confirmed that the theoretical possibilities offered by it actually gets translated into higher position in their society when compared to the other tribal and non-tribal groups. Empirical studies in recent times show that while enjoying higher status than in the caste societies they are not treated equally as per men. Though the social system conditions women's status, one cannot state unconditionally, that her status deteriorates with patriarchal set up or improves unconditionally with matrilineal structure. The nuances of the systems have to be studied. For that purpose we are going to study some of the folktales of the Rabhas and thereby trying to form a clear picture of women as perceived in the community.

Instead of arranging the tales according to some classificatory scheme (e.g. Romantic tales, tales of magic, etc.), I have tried to arrange the tales according to the dominant theme or trait represented by women as characters of the tales under different headings. But sometimes some tales feature more than one trait or themes.

Ramanujan observed in his *Introduction to Folktales from India* that if quests and tasks are part of the life story of the hero in a male-centered tale, a different focus makes itself felt in women-centered tales. Saving, rescuing or reviving a man or bringing back to life (husband or fiancé or beloved) often solving riddles on his behalf, becomes the life task of a heroine. In such tales women play the dominant role but she needs the help and support from other male or female to successfully accomplish the task or the mission she undertakes.

4.1 WOMEN IN HER NORMATIVE ROLE

The accepted norm in societies runs along the patriarchal lines. The discrimination against women is so deep rooted in our societies that a girl is conditioned to accept all the trouble and injustice happily by the time she matures into a woman. A woman is praised for the compromises she makes for the welfare of the family. Patriarchy's set standard is internalized by women. She was assigned roles determined by her gender. Thus womanhood is associated positively with the values of hard work, motherhood, chastity etc. All these values are related to the integrity of the household. Skilled and hardworking woman is symbolically associated with making the reputation of the household. Thus women's roles in tales after tales revolve around being mother, daughter, wife, sister or a beloved. Socialization process which is a continuous one helps to learn the normative behaviour and that mostly happens to be stereotypic behaviour assigned to women.

4.1.1 *Dyumakchi* (the Chaste Woman)¹

The influential and principal sage of heaven, Krimisung cursed the young boy Dadrang and damsel Chikchi to be born as human beings

1. Sarma, 2010:51-54
Rabha, 1977:37-40

on earth as they were involved in love affairs which the sage considered to be a sin. The curse of a sage is considered irreversible. It comes into execution in due time in the house of Queen Hu-Hu and King Ha-ha. Dadrang was born as a son. He was named Dadan. Likewise Chikchi was born in the house of sage Jinjiram and Jinari on earth. She was named Dyumakchi.

Ha-ha was said to be the first king of Rabhas. After his death, Dadan came to the throne. He was popular among his subjects. When the king of a distant land came to know about Dadan's enormous wealth, he proclaimed war and attacked the former's kingdom almost suddenly. King Dadan's dexterous general Marukshetri killed the King of Kashi in the battle. After that, king had conquered almost all the opponent kings with the help of Marukshetri. But after killing the king of Kashi, Dadan's kingdom began to face odds one after another. The king lost all his mental balance and became indifferent to the royal duties. Complete anarchy prevailed in the kingdom as a result of that. The king was seen wandering through the forest with bows and arrows in hand. He roamed day in and day out.

Suddenly one day, he saw God's daughter Dyumakchi who sat drying her long tresses of hair. The king got passionately attracted towards beautiful Dyumakchi. They fell in love. The king brought her to the palace and decided to marry her royally. The whole palace found itself in a quandary with her arrival. Intoxicated with his new love, the king began to belittle his Queen Toba. Taking advantage of the situation Marukshetri, the army general hatched a conspiracy. He took many royal officials, councilors, ministers and generals into confidence and sent Dyumakchi to jail. He even held her hair and strapped her with a cane. Only the old minister protested against such inhuman tortures. For this Marukshetri imprisoned the minister along with the king.

Marukshetri's mother Princess Nemanukkini became furious when she heard of the inhuman tortures meted out to Dyumakchi by Marukshetri. She cursed her son and accused him as a sinner as he tortured a weak and chaste nymph. She also asked him to fear about the consequence of touching a chaste woman. According to her, a king is entitled to have two or more queens, and none could interfere in that. She accused him of bringing disgrace to their race. Finally she told him that he lost all right to continue as the royal general of king Dadan and asked him to give up the post immediately or else he would die certainly

in the coming war. She did not withdraw her curse although Marukshetri asked for her forgiveness.

Meanwhile taking advantage of the chaotic situation Dyumakchi fled from the prison. Marukshetri was killed in a battle. King Dadan now out of jail, was searching frantically for Dyumakchi. Dyumakchi was also wandering in search of Dadan. But they could not meet each other. Dadan got so exhausted that he died instantly. Dyumakchi, too hit by affliction and melancholy, assumed the shape of a stone in a hill. Because of the curse of celestial sage, their longing for union remained unfulfilled even in this birth.

Chastity as a power is recurrent theme that runs through many folkloric texts. Tribal folktales also incorporate this theme in abundance. The word chastity includes all the qualities “good” woman should possess, apart from the imperative virtue of chastity such as “service” (to one’s husband) and the spirit of loyalty, self-sacrifice and modesty in bearing.

Hart makes the interesting observation that the *Karpu* (chastity) of the wife “consisted of a sort of asceticism, the restraining of all impulses that were in any way immodest. Clearly the more sexually attractive a woman is, the more power her chastity endows her with” (Hart 1975, 97).

Dyumakchi, an exceptionally beautiful woman was held in high esteem as a chaste woman. When Marukshetri unleashed inhuman torture on her, putting her in prison by pulling her hair, the mother of Marukshetri, Nemanukkini, cursed her son. She asked her son to fear the consequence of ill treating a chaste woman. It is believed that from her innate chastity comes the secret power of woman which can destroy the most powerful and strongest person. Thus the mother told her son that power of chastity is to be feared and revered as it could elevate a person’s position as well as can prove extremely destructive if threatened. Curse is something to be feared and the person receiving curse is believed to live a condemned life. This tale reflects on the issue and reasserts the fact the Rabha society believes in the heavenly curse and its effect needs to be feared.

Although passionately in love with each other Daran and Dyumakchi could not get united at the end as they were cursed by celestial sage for loving

each other in their previous birth in heavenly abode. This is important because as human beings their power is limited and they cannot challenge or overthrow divine wish.

In Marukshtri's mother, Nemanukkini we find a strong and sensible woman who is compassionate about a woman in distress. As a woman she could not tolerate the suffering and pain of a chaste woman. Having failed to guide her son in the right direction, she went to the extent of cursing her son to be dead for his misdeed. But Dyumakchi and Daran's first wife Toba are passive victims silently bearing atrocities and injustice meted against them.

4.1.2 *Tore-Tophre*²

A sage named Tura was engrossed in meditation in the forest. It so happened one day that two sisters- Dikhaiba and Nadaba went to him for his blessings so that they can bear child. The sage blessed them and said both of them would have a daughter each. But the meditation of the sage got disrupted by the two girls' extraordinary beauty. Suddenly he felt a great desire for them and wanted that his desire be fulfilled. Unwillingly they satisfied the sage, as they did not dare to refuse the sage for fear of incurring his wrath. After being satisfied in his desire, the sage once again got immersed in meditation. In due course of time Dikhaiba and Nadaba gave birth to one female child each. Dikhaiba named her child as Tore and Nadaba named her as Tophre. Tore was elder and Tophre was younger.

The girls became extremely beautiful with the attainment of youth. They were wildly passionate and even reckless. One day they went out in search of their respective grooms without the knowledge of their mothers. They found two exceedingly handsome young men- named Phanindar and Nanindar, who were brothers. Tore and Tophre were enamored by their beauty. They were looking through the chink of the forest at the young men without a wink.

After finishing the work in the field the two brothers went to a fountain to bathe. Tore and Tophre were expert in the art of enchanting. Their mothers too were enchantresses. Their young minds became

2. Sarma, 2010:55-60
Rabha, 1977:41-48
Hakacham, 2009:115-120
Patgiri, 2005:406-411

restless. By dint of magic, they turned themselves into two "*ghilas*" (a knee cap shaped seed normally with which children play) set on two arum leaves which flowed down the fountain. The two brothers, on seeing the approaching "*ghilas*" on the arum leaves were very eager to pick them up. Both of them picked one "*ghilas*" each and carried it home with them. They would wash their hands with its shell or play with it. Overjoyed Phanindar instantly broke his "*ghila*" to wash his hands. To his utter surprise huge quantity of blood splashed out of the '*ghila*' and congealed mass turned into a green pigeon which flew into the sky. Nanindar on the other hand kept his '*ghila*' carefully in a place in his house. Next day as usual they went to the field. When they returned from the field after extensive hard labor, they were taken by surprise. Everything in the house was neat and clean, their meal too was cooked for them. Somebody must have done their household work without their knowledge.

One day Nanindar was hiding in a corner of the house to find out the actual fact. To his astonishment, he saw that the '*ghila*' was split into two automatically and a beautiful damsel, coming out of it, was instantly busy doing domestic chores as if she was part of the family. With utmost courage Nanindar approached the damsel, caught hold of her hand from behind and asked, "Who are you? Whether a goddess or a human being?" she said, "I am the daughter of a sage. I had another sister. Both of us out of our youthful passion were enamoured by you, the two brothers. We turned ourselves into two "*ghilas*" and thereafter you took us into your possession. But your elder brother killed my elder sister. Providence, as though disposed our will". Tears rolled down her cheek as she remembered her sister. She continued, "You have held my hand today. Thus my body goes impure. I shall not be able to go into '*ghila*' any longer. What will be my way out?" Tophre's touching words shocked Nanindar. When his brother returned and came to know the story, he was repentant as he inadvertently killed the other bride who was to be his. He was also bewitched by the bride's extraordinary beauty. The village elders held a meeting and were moved by the touching story. Nanindar and the girl agreed before the congregation to tie the nuptial knot. Everyone endorsed their agreement and decided that marriage would be solemnized after the harvesting season.

Phanindar was repentant but he cannot amend his action. But now he totally became engrossed in the beauty and attributes of his

brother's bride. He felt jealous. He could not bear to think that his brother should get such a beautiful girl while he pined. He decided that he would kill his brother before his marriage so that there would be no bar to accept her as his wife.

One day while going in the forest, taking a chance, Phanindar who was stronger than Nanindar, knocked his brother down and set a heavy boulder on his chest. After that he returned home and declared that Nanindar felt prey to a tiger. Meanwhile the bride reared a "*salika*" bird that could speak well like a human being. The *salika* used to go with Nanindar whenever he moved away. That day too, it witnessed the entire incident and narrated it to Tophre. She then went in search of her would be husband as directed and guided by the '*salika*' and rescued Nanindar.

Fearing further danger to Nanindar's life she reared a dog too. With training the dog became the other life savers of Nanindar. Both the '*salika*' and the dog kept close watch on Nanindar and reported everything to their mistress.

One day both the brothers went out hunting and entered a thick forest. There was a big banyan tree and its lower part was a huge hollow. The elder brother asked his younger brother to find iguanas, if any and the latter did it. Taking advantage of his posture, the elder brother tied his younger brother with a creeper forcefully and stuffed him into the hole. The dog and the '*salika*' bird informed about the incident to their mistress. This time she rescued Nanindar taking the dog as her companion. Again one day Phanindar tried to kill his brother by forcefully tying him to the trunk of a tree with the creeper. Once again Tofre saved his life with her two companions.

Nanindar was very simple and upright. He did not disclose about his ordeals in the hands of his brother to anyone. He only kept enduring silently and complied with his brother's direction with respect and without any question. Both Nanindar and Tofre did not think of taking revenge on Phanindar.

Once they cleared jungle for cultivation and piled the logs in a heap. One day they set fire to the dried logs which were inflamed easily. Nanindar was busy with turning the burning logs upside down for their easy blazing. Taking a chance the elder brother thrust his brother into the fire and put a raw log upon him to mark his cremation. The dog and the

'salika' bird witnessed the horrible incident and informed it to Tofre. This time she arrived at the spot and with great difficulty, picked up Nanindar from the charcoals. But her betrothed would-be husband was already dead being half burnt. She began to wail clasping the dead body. All her hopes are destroyed now. With great pain and agony she swooned for a long time. When she regained her senses she revoked the life of her half-burnt betrothed with the help of occult power. But he did not get the form of man: what he got was the form of a kind of fish called *Na-ner*.

With tears in her eyes and with a heavy heart she released her fish shaped betrothed into the midst of a lake. After that she took leave from her most obedient and helpful bird and the dog.

She thought over her future course of action and decided that it would be dangerous to put up with Phanindar. It would also not be proper to return to her mother's home. She came back near the lake and transferring herself into a "*To-maykhow*" bird, she began to live beside the lake as a mark of her love for Nanindar. They were not married, separation was their destiny.

Rabhas believe that when the "*To-maykhow*" bird chirps on the side of the lake, the "*Na-ner*" comes out from beneath the water and both enjoy themselves to the hilt.

In one version found in two different collections (*Juju Budini Sastar and Asom Anchalar Janajatiya Sadhu*) the tale ends here.

But in another version (collected by Rajen Rabha and Joykanta Sarma) the story does not end here. We find the following portion-

Tore and Tophre's mothers searched for them frantically throughout hills and forests but could not find them. But later when they came to know about the sad consequences faced by their daughters, they were furious and rushed to teach Phanindar a lesson. Having seen them Phanindar tried to flee to save himself. They followed him. They were enchantresses themselves, so they created a deceptive river before Phanindar to counter him. He did not realize the impending danger, and jumped into the river to save him. But he was turned into a crocodile. Dikhaiba and Nadaba could take their revenge and were satisfied that nemesis had worked for Phanindar. Finally the two mothers returned home with a heavy heart having lost their daughters.

As we know tales have been used as a genre for educating or civilizing children more particularly girls. These tales are important because they set standards for sexual and social conduct which complied with inhibiting forms of socialization and were to be internalized by listeners and tellers of tales. (Zack Zipes, p.33). Though the narrative perspective may vary, the starting point for the discourse on manners and sexual and social conduct through fairy tales and folktales affirm the dominant Hindu view regarding the regulation of inner and outer nature in favour of male hegemony and rationalized male domination. In this tale the two young unmarried girls became the victim of desire of a sage. They obliged him unwillingly because they were always taught from the very childhood to be submissive and to obey figures who command power and control over the society by virtue of belonging to the dominant group. They have internalized and accepted the domination in such a way that the thought of protesting did not come to their mind. They obliged, satisfied him and left the place still having reverence for him. Since women are expected to live passively, so repression of their mind can be seen as to please and perpetuate male domination. Like most women who are patriarchal conditioned, these two girls are victimized by what Mitchell calls the “‘inferiorized’ and ‘alternative’ (second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy” (Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, pp 404-5).

Tore and Tophre are young girls full of life and passion. To realize their dream they left their homes without informing their mothers. But incidentally the elder one got killed. Tophre, the younger one now became the center of attraction for both the brothers. She was loyal to her would be husband. Chastity and loyalty are qualities highly desired in women. But unfortunately her beauty and qualities became a cause of rift between the brothers and danger loomed large on her groom. Phanindar got jealous of his brother and tried to kill him out of sheer jealousy. He thought that by removing his brother from her life he would be able to get her.

Here Tophre became an active heroine. Chastity of women is valued and Tophre was chaste, loyal, dedicated bride to her would be husband Nanindar. When Phanindar attacked and tried to kill her would be husband she came to his

rescue many a times and saved his life although she could not save him fully from the final assault. She was helped in her endeavour by two animals- one 'salika' bird and a dog whom she reared to protect her beloved. Tophre quite intelligently made herself strong with the active help of the animals as she knew only too well that she is up against a formidable enemy, a man who is physically powerful than her and at the same time her would be husband's elder brother. She tried to negotiate with her apparent weakness with mental toughness and strength and thereby qualifying as an active heroine. She is active, intelligent and willing to face the problem and try to solve it too. Although she could not save him from the final assault, yet she was successful in bringing him back to life though she was unable to give him a full human shape. So an active heroine is assisted in her mission by occult power and animals. She cannot stand alone against the society. She needs outside help in some form to face the challenge.

We also see two strong mothers who are vulnerable at the beginning of the story. They were exploited at the beginning of the tale but came out strongly at the end to take revenge on the person who spoilt their daughters' happiness. Women taking revenge that too successfully, is not very common in folktales unless they are equipped with some sort of occult power. Possessing special power gives them the edge on their rival who became a victim to their special power. Other wise women are generally shown as suffering as passive victim of male aggression. Here sexual exploitation of the two young girls were shown as normal and natural as the person committing the crime was held in high esteem by the society- a sage. So the girls needed to make him happy. Patriarchal society exploits women according to their need and women in turn take it as their destiny to fulfill the unjust demand. Women are oriented to think that way because any protest or show of individuality or assertion of their mind would term them as rebel and eventually society would brand them as evil and negative. In this tale we see gradual change from a weak, vulnerable character to strong women who could take revenge on the man who troubled their daughters. At the beginning they were shown as victim to a sage's lust. But towards the end we see

transformation in them as Propp (1958) mentioned that in folktales journey is transformative.

Marie Maclean in her essay “Oppositional Practices in Women’s Traditional Narrative” observed that active heroine in folktales represents the utopian strain in such stories. For women in traditional societies a utopian situation is one where a woman was free to choose or not to choose her own partner and where marriage meant love but more importantly equality and respect. The active heroine in folktale sets out to make her own life to change the rules in her own favour. This can be seen in this particular tale where Tore and Tophre went out in search of their grooms without the knowledge of their mothers. They got passionately attracted towards two exceedingly handsome young men. Since both of them were expert in the art of enchanting they used this particular power to transform themselves into two *ghilas* in order to get close to Phanindar and Nanindar. Thus they were active in realizing their dream, in finding their life partners and also finding ways and means to fulfill their dreams. They tried to change rules in their own favour and became almost successful till tragedy strike them and the elder one of the sisters got killed. The fact that they ventured out to fulfill their passion and search for the men of their dream is itself a big step for a woman in this tradition bound male dominated world.

4.1.3 *Surya and Chandra*³

Version one

Surya (Sun) and Chandra (Moon) were brothers. One day they got ready and came to request their mother for her permission to attend a feast arranged by creator Brahma. The mother gave permission but before allowing them to leave she told them a thing or two. She told them that she had attended one such feast long back with their father. The brothers asked, “Our father? Mother, where is our father? When will he be back? The mother replied that he would not come back as he has gone for *Mokshadhama* (abode of the free soul). As a caution she informed them that the feast requires discipline. The gods, humans, *asuras* (demons) and in fact everybody sits in his or her demarcated

3. Rabha, 1977:107-115
Sarma, 2010:96-102

place. Nobody can touch the other. If one does he or she is considered impure and is either expelled or punished. The mother asked her son to be careful in their behaviour, manners, movements and all. "Remember we belong to the god's class". Finally she asked them, "After eating, bring the portion of the food, normally meant for gods for me. And don't forget".

After reaching there Surya and Chandra sat in a row meant for the gods. Chandra did not forget his mother's counsel. Before eating he kept aside a morsel and packed it as instructed by his mother. Surya on the other hand, was eating voraciously and forgot to take the residue for his mother. Instead he threw the left over. When he remembered what his mother had asked for, it was already too late.

Since he had eaten like a glutton, he felt an urge to defecate on their way back. A wicked idea came to his mind. He collected his stool in a packet and as soon as he reached home, he handed it over to his mother and hurriedly went away. The mother opened it with great joy and reverence but got shocked and horrified at the misdeed of her son finding stool in it. She was fuming with indignation and hurt when Chandra came out with his packet. The mother threw Chandra's packet and slapped Chandra. She abused Chandra, "you, scum of the earth: good for nothing boys, go, go away from my presence. At what inauspicious moment did I conceive you both who have brought nothing but disgrace upon the family and race!" she shouted and burst into tears. Chandra was too awe-struck to speak. He did not know why his mother got so angry. When her anger subsided he asked her the reason behind her harsh words. The mother told him what Surya has done. Chandra felt bad. He got up and picked up his packet and offered it to her. Now the mother also felt bad as her temper was directed towards the son who was not at all guilty and who had full of reverence for her. She blessed him, "dear son, the example of your reverence for your mother will remain shining for years to come. You will be respected and worshipped as a god by the people. Your soothing and silky rays would gladden the minds of all creatures. But your brother, my son Surya, I curse him. As he offered me the packet of stool as meal, so he would have to dry all the rotten things of this Universe. With his parching rays he would have to touch the shit as a daily routine. People would be annoyed at his blistering heat. He would never be soothing". Surya who was hiding nearby, heard the curse, and felt sad and repentant at his misdeed. He

came sobbing and fell at his mother's feet and begged forgiveness. He prayed for the revocation of the curse. Chandra also pleaded on his behalf. But their mother said that her curse is irreversible and it was his conduct which compelled her to curse her son. But after continued pleading from her sons she relented and said, "My curse is infallible. But let me lighten your burden. You too would be adorned by human beings".

The mother is very powerful here. In the absence of the father the responsibility and control of the family rests with the mother. She looks after the two sons and guides them well. When needed she is strict and sticks to her point rock-solid. When she is hurt by her son's conduct she was quick to take action against him. She did not forgive her son for his misdeed. Again she did justice, punished the offender (Surya) and honoured the good one (Chandra).

Version two

Surya and Chandra were husband and wife respectively. They used to fight and argue among themselves daily. One day the quarrel over their children (stars) reached its zenith. The wife said to Surya, "I do not know what to do. The kids are unmanageable. They do not listen to me and are rowdy. Don't you have any responsibility in this regard? Has it been proper on your part to stay without any responsibility?"

Surya countered, "I have never said that I have no responsibility. But as a mother your responsibility is greater".

"It can never be so. Aren't you a partner in giving birth to such a huge number of kids?" Chandra argued.

Surya countered, "Yes, I am, but the importance and responsibility of the mother who gives birth are greater. My responsibility comes later."

As a mother Chandra was worried, "we have given birth to an unlimited number of children. We do not even know their names. We cannot count how many of them have got perished and under what circumstances."

Surya assured her, "none of them got perished. Our children (stars) cannot go anywhere leaving us behind. Every one of them has his or her orbit and circle. They will again come back to us after playing and moving hither and thither in their own circles. The orders of the creator

will have to be complied with. I have a lot of duties. I shall be monitoring your and the children's activities from long distance."

After that Surya took leave of his wife. Chandra was left behind to take care of their children. Thus we see stars with their mother Chandra.

In this version of the tale Surya and Chandra were husband and wife. But they fought regularly over their children (stars). Chandra, the wife accused her husband Surya of not taking good care of their many children. They were unruly; didn't listen to their mother as the father didn't perform his duties towards the children. He didn't take any responsibility which irritates the wife. To this he replied that although he hadn't denied his responsibility, according to him it was the first and foremost duty of the mother to take care of the children. Inside the house, it was the mother who needed to take care of the children and was held responsible. The father, Surya, showing other commitments went out. That's why Rabhas believed that the stars are always seen with the mother Chandra. Barbara Risman observes that little cultural change has occurred around fathering. In every culture the responsibility of upbringing of the children rests with the mother. Most men are not morally responsible for the quality of family life as we have seen in the conversation between the husband (Surya) and the wife (Chandra). Women have yet to discover how to avoid being held accountable, as it happened with Chandra, who though upset with her husband still stands by her children, a duty she cannot possibly avoid. Father takes the overall responsibility while day to day catering of the needs of children rests with the mother. Father is less concerned at sharing responsibilities of parenting.

Version three:

Surya and Chandra were two sisters. They were married but issueless. Their husbands were very simple. They were always compelled to do whatever their wives asked. Both the sisters were sad for not having children. After discussion among themselves both the sisters approached Brahma and implored him for a boon so that they could have children. They prayed, "A long period of time has elapsed since our marriage was solemnized. We have no children so far. We pray for your blessings so that we may become mothers."

Brahma replied, "I am very sad to hear it. After marriage a couple should get children or else life's aspirations remain unfulfilled". Brahma asked how many children they wanted. They replied, "We want countless number of children –so that we may be proud as first-ranking mothers". Brahma blessed them as they wished. In due course of time both the sisters started giving birth to innumerable sons and daughters. At one point, the living space for these children became inadequate in the sky. Chandra, an intelligent woman suggested to Surya that in accordance with the benediction from Brahma, they are getting children and more would be born in the days to come and they have to provide them with accommodation. She proposed to Surya that they should send some of their children to the open field lying unutilized in the Netherland. As proposed both of them went there to see the suitability of the place. Surya was enthralled, she liked the field very much but side by side an unscrupulous longing crept into her mind. To keep the land totally under her children's occupation Surya sent all her children to the Netherland keeping Chandra in the dark. Chandra was very sad at the act of betrayal by her own sister. Chandra suffered mental torment in the backdrop of Surya's evil designs. Losing patience and getting emotional, she went to creator Brahma in order to divulge before him the tales of her woes. Brahma calmed her, "everybody has to face the consequences of the works he or she does. Your children would remain twinkling in this blue sky for ages. People of the Earth will be enthralled by their sight and like you they too will be adored by human beings. But Netherland is dark. The children of Surya will have to remain always in darkness. They will not be seen and adored by people of the earth. Therefore my child, go now, give up your melancholy". Chandra having heard these infallible words of Brahma came back home fully satisfied.

In this version of the tale *Surya and Chandra* (Sun and Moon) we get to see typical sibling rivalry and jealousy for each other to get the best for their own children. Dominating women like Surya and Chandra who are incidentally sisters make their husband look like timid characters. Elder sister Surya schemed against younger sister Chandra and did not share things with her. This so pained Chandra that she narrated her story to God Brahma who consoled by saying that her children would shine bright as star and people on Earth would worship her children in contrast to Surya's Children who are destined to languish in darkness. This story also asserted the fact that children bring fulfillment to a woman. As a

mother a woman's priority is always to safeguard her children's interest, no matter whom and what comes her way. This aspect is still relevant today because a woman is regarded incomplete without a child. In the tales the dominant symbolic pattern of woman is one who gives love and affection. But this pattern is not consistent in tales. There are a number of step-mother tales which in a negative way emphasize the longing for motherly affection. But Ramanujan (1994: XXVI) says that mothers are split into good mothers and wicked step-mothers to express ambivalence. Tales depict rivalries among women and portray them as jealous and wicked even in the kinship context. In the tales instances of gender conflicts are rare but there are instances of alternative view points. There are instances of rivalries among co wives and sisters as exemplified in the rivalry between Surya and Chandra and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Thus construction of gender is closely linked with kinship.

As a theme women's jealousy is to be equated only by that of their falsehood and superficiality. This weakness of the female character is dreaded because it destroys the harmony of the household. When the wives of a polygamist are jealous of one another, the births of children only add to the problems. The mothers so kind and loving toward their own children, often become hostile toward the offspring of the other wives. Each wife is seeking the favor of the father through her progeny. In the case of a chief's or king's wives, jealousy can be mixed with political ambition that might go as far as murder. Consequently the character of the step mother symbolizes the jealousy of females of the most terrible and ugliest kind.

The husbands are meek and less than independent characters in this tale. They are playing a secondary role who are compelled to do whatever their wives asked them to do. There is an indirect hint that they are incapable as men. Childless for long after marriage the wives approached Brahma to solve and fulfill their dream of getting children. From the conversation of Brahma and the two sisters it was quite clear that childlessness is not an acceptable condition by women themselves. For a woman a child brings about a fulfillment in her married life. Brahma also told them that life's aspirations are not fulfilled without children. Moreover giving birth to more children is a capacity appreciated in

women through which women themselves want to be recognized as first ranking mothers.

We find a role reversal here. Generally women are accused of not bearing a child. She is often humiliated and targeted for lack of a child among a married couple. But in this tale there is a subtle hint at the incapacities of the husbands of the two sisters at giving birth. They were shown as timid and being dominated by their wives. The wives were seen as approaching creator Brahma. They told their unhappiness over not being able to bear a child even though considerable time had elapsed since they got married. After listening to them Brahma also agreed that they were rightly sad and worried as without child aspiration of life never gets fulfilled.

Since within our traditional society a woman can not be shown as getting involved with other men outside marriage openly, however pressing the need might be, the father figure's (creator Brahma's) help is sought out as a middle course to bless the women to realize their dream. Otherwise it would amount to breaking the moral order. The boon by Brahma means that they did not do anything immoral. They are not transgressors. Brahma's divine intervention sorted out the problem making everyone concerned happy.

Even if they are strong women they needed the help of a man (Brahma) to sort out their problem. They do not have an absolutely independent existence. In folktales women can sustain themselves only with outside help from men.

4.1.4 *Son of a Widow (Bidhaba Maa aru Maura lorar Kahini)*⁴

Once upon a time a widow along with her son used to live in a village. The young boy always asked his mother to get him a trap to catch birds. So one day the mother somehow managed a trap for him. One day a crane fell a catch to his trap. In reality the crane was Parvati, the wife of Mahadeva, in disguise. The mother was very happy to see the catch and wanted to kill and cook it for them. The son was not interested. Parvati requested him to let her go and in return promised to give her daughter Lakshmi in marriage to him. Shiva was not at all happy at this development. But to keep his wife's words he gave his

4. Karab Ch. Rabha, 75:Bardamal, Goalpara

consent to marry his daughter Lakshmi to the boy. But within seven days of marriage, Lord Shiva took her away to his abode. While returning with her father Lakshmi gave a ring to her human husband as a sign of her love for him. But Lord Shiva after reaching heaven, wanted to remarry her. On the other hand her husband was very upset over their separation and started crying under a tall tree. A vulture was feeding her children at that moment on the top of the tree. As she found the boy crying she came down and wanted to know the reason behind his sadness. When she came to know about the entire story, she took him to heaven by making him sit over her back. Assisted by *Kalabou* (Kalabou in Hindu Mythology refers to a banana tree given a human shape who is draped in white saree with red border; kala bou worshipping is a must in every Durga Puja, who stands in front of Durga idol, she is considered the wife of Lord Ganesha, the son of Goddess Durga) they reached the *Vivah Mandap* (marriage altar). Lakshmi could recognize her husband by the ring she had given to her, and immediately decided to return with her husband. Shiva got extremely angry at this and cursed them that they would never be happy.

Lakshmi and her husband started living happily. One day after cleaning the house she took out all the clothes and kept it outside for warming and left for fishing. She asked her husband not to touch any of the clothes kept for warming. But as destiny had it, the weather worsened and thunderstorm lashed the place. Compelled by the situation the husband had to collect the clothes to bring it inside. But as soon as he touched he was transformed into a peacock. When she returned home Lakshmi did not find her husband. Immediately she understood what might have happened. She also transformed herself into a peahen. This way the curse of her father is fulfilled.

Mythological characters like Shiva and Parvati and their daughter Lakshmi are adopted with a local flavour. Here lies the beauty of a folktale which travels and in the process gets localized with the culture and tradition, way of life of the community. We see different additions and variations from time to time, teller to teller, from society to society. Here in this tale Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and the daughter of Shiva and Parvati was transformed into a local Rabha girl who works at home, goes out for fishing like any other village girl does.

Mother's promise to the boy that she would give her daughter in marriage to him in return of her release from his trap is not accepted positively by the father. Father Shiva was not at all happy at mother's making a promise regarding the daughter's marriage as it undermines his authority and control over the family. Quite reluctantly he agreed to her promise and gave her in marriage to the boy but within seven days of marriage, he took her back to his heavenly abode. Thus the father became instrumental in effecting a break up between husband-wife. Thus we see that mother's promise was not valued. Parvati, like most women in our society was given a secondary status regarding decision making. Because of near universal subordination of women and girls to at least some men but more saliently—a structural system in which some men and male values based in race, class and sexuality as well as gender dominate all women and children politically, socially, domestically- most women speak from social, economic and cultural margins.

Shiva is here presented as a status conscious father, a representative of the male psyche. When his daughter disobeys his wish of marrying her off to a groom of his choice, his ego is hurt. When she returned with her husband to her earthly abode, she went against the dictates of her father, thus incurring his curse. She was fighting from the margin against the centre- the power centre, her father, as bell hooks sees it. Disobeying father (male figure) means inviting unhappiness and trouble to the extent of destroying her life. Shiva is here a representative of the patriarchal society.

This tale reflects society at large. Decision regarding a daughter's marriage is mostly taken by the father, the centre of the family. In this tale the mother becomes a transgressor, a fact not taken lightly by the father, because by doing so she went against the usual practice of the society. But even after the daughter's marriage, the father tries to dominate and interfere in her life. We have seen that the daughter does not have a say initially, she did not protest. Even when she went against the decision of her father it was not done independently by her. She needed the help of her husband who went to heaven to bring her back. Thus once again we see that women are most of the time passive and if and when they act, they need the outside help and support to achieve what they want.

4.1.5 *Hataburi Puk Keneke Hal* (how the *Hataburi* insect was born)⁵

Once there was a big arrangement of a marriage party. It was a traditional Rabha marriage. On the day of the feast the ritual was such that the bride has to serve everyone invited to the feast by her own hand and in such a way that it includes everyone present in the feast. The bride has to serve rice to everyone with a *hata* (rounded wooden serving spoon). The girl was humiliated and insulted in public if she fails to entertain everyone present i.e. she needs to serve everyone equally. If she falters in her job it was taken as a sign of evil omen or inauspiciousness. So the girl was accompanied by an old mature woman who could guide her through the entire event. The girl started serving with a *denga* (wooden spoon). Suddenly the cloth around her waist fell down (*kambung*). As a result she had to keep the bowl of rice on ground. Out of shame she ran away from that place by hiding her face. She jumped into a pond. People gathered at the celebration ran after her. But she never came back out of water. Later that girl turned out to be *Lazuki puk*. Rabhas call it *chong deng* or *Hataburi puk*.

Women in our traditional societies are judged by their activities and capabilities in managing household affairs. That's why the Rabha girl was asked to serve everybody so that her skill in managing people and entertaining guest is ascertained. This particular girl failed to do so when her waist cloth dropped and she was ashamed publicly. This shows her inability in managing herself while taking care of other invited guest. A woman is expected to present herself in a proper manner fulfilling the expectation of the patriarchal society. To save herself from disgrace, shame and criticism she ran away and jumped into a pond. She was presented as weak, vulnerable, and one who can not stand in the face of criticism. For her only course is retreat, which she did. A girl is brought up in such a way that she fails to rationalize things and move forward. She was under constant pressure to prove herself, to perform within the four walls be it in managing household, pleasing family members, giving birth to children, upbringing them, along with many other things. Fear of failure and hope for approval dominates her life disallowing her any individuality, freedom of mind and action. She took the extreme step of ending her life because she is brought up

5. Hakacham, 2009:77

in such a way that she knew that she had to perform well inside the four walls to make others happy. The pressure of performance builds in her and she internalizes this expectation as natural. The women know from childhood that she exists primarily for the male and that her role is to be a wife and mother. She passes from the domination of the father to that of her husband and later on to her son.

Kirin Narayan in “Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon-Himalayan Foothill Folktales” observed that the ideology of modesty associated with honour pervaded women’s lives in Kangra and was explicitly linked to the practice of veiling. *Sharm* involved hiding one’s sexuality, showing deference to males and elders, and in all upholding the honor of one’s family. *Sharm* invoked as the reason that unmarried girls should behave circumspectly and not adorn themselves, the reason for married women to veil in the presence of their older male-in-laws. As a powerful prescribed norm modesty (*Sharm*) seemed to connect social ideals with emotions lodged in mind and bodies. In this tale the newly wedded bride was ashamed of her situation the moment her waists clothe was dropped in front of the public gathering. She stood defenseless overwhelmed by *Sharm* (modesty) and ran away from the people and gave up her life by jumping into water.

Again serving in the feast related to marriage is special, because at the time of the feast, everyone is together. The whole village and all the relatives are present. This allows them to recognize the bride and her qualities and potential at the same time. If she comes out good here, she proves herself and creates a good impression about herself as capable and her skills would be acknowledged which is a very important matter for a woman.

4.1.6 *Hati Kenekai Hal*⁶ (how the Elephant was born)

Once upon a time there lived a grand big family from grand parents to grand children. It’s a big joint family. They used to cook for all in a single kitchen, but while eating they used to bring it to their respective rooms. While distributing food all were called by beating drums. The eldest daughter –in –law used to do every work inside the

6. Hakacham, 2009:75-76

household including cooking food for everyone. With this excessive workload she got disturbed and irritated sometimes. She was even more frustrated by different comments and criticisms from family members which hurt her a lot. One day on listening to such uncharitable comments, she was so upset that she did not eat anything. Next morning she left her home with the intention of never returning. But while leaving she did not forget to touch the feet of her husband. She took with her two pairs of *ural* (mortar) one pair of *kula* (winnowing fan), one *Ural mari* (pestle) and one *kachi* (scythe) while leaving. Every one in the family rose from bed and got busy with their work and life. Nobody noticed the fact that she was not present at home. Nobody was bothered about her. But the thought about her came to everyone's mind as it was time for lunch. Her absence made everyone serious for sometime and they started looking for her in different directions. She on her part turned herself into an elephant out of disgust and pain with the help of the things she brought with her.

But being a woman the thought of her home kept coming to her mind. So one day at night she reached her home in her changed form. Every one could see her in their dreams who asked them to stay happy and united as a family.

Womanhood is associated with responsibilities inside the household. Thus when the woman transformed herself to an elephant one day out of bitterness and frustration, even then she could not restrict herself from visiting her family one more time in the transformed form and also wished them happiness. In her day to day life she had remained unnoticed and nobody gave her any importance till it was time for lunch. A woman is associated with need, need of one kind or other. Otherwise as an individual having an identity of her own she does not stand a chance. The woman in the house is made to live in seclusion. This kind of exclusion is another kind of *purdah* (veil). To quote Jasbir Jain "...even if *purdah* is not manifest in the matter of clothing it is perceptible in the unequal relationship which exists between different groups, no matter what the basis of the group formation is...money, political power, colour or gender".

Sonia Lee's observation on African folktales is also relevant here. Lee observed that it is much more entertaining to speak about women's faults than their qualities. From the point of view of male, if the woman has so many faults it

explains her inferiority. Man is seen as the master because he is thought to be morally superior and women must submit to his will. Although she has many faults for which she is criticized all the time as in the case of the Daughter –in-law, she is considered useful, indispensable to man. This fact is highlighted when she is missed by the entire family during lunch.

Kirin Narayan while analyzing the tale “Daughter My Little Bread” (page 49), observed that wives were considered replaceable, yet they were valued too. Men’s need for women’s labour –and also perhaps their reproductive powers as “vessel” was highlighted in Urmilaji’s (storyteller) explanation for why the king had been attracted by the sparkling brass pot his attendants brought him after the girl polished it. Urmilaji said “he saw the pot, and he saw that this was a woman who worked well. Then later he saw that she was beautiful too”. In this tale the daughter-in-law did every single thing inside the household but still unable to satisfy anyone. But when she left and the family members did not get their lunch ready they felt the need to search her. Till then no one was bothered about her. Her service was missed and at that moment they somewhat realized her value if not as an individual but definitely as a labour force. Once again a woman is missed in the time of need.

In male dominated societies man is central and woman is the ‘other’, repressed, ignored and pushed to the margins and her ardent wish is to be recognized as a human being with an independent existence.

4.1.7 *Bidyabati aru Bari Sali* (son of a widow)⁷

There was a kingdom called *Ratnagiri*. The king had a daughter named Bidyabati. She was beautiful as well as highly accomplished girl. When she came of age, the father started thinking about her marriage like every father does. Accordingly the king asked his cabinet to arrange for her “*swayamber*” where she will choose her husband. The person, who will successfully defeat her by posing three questions which she would fail to answer, would be accepted as her groom. In this verbal duel of intelligence whoever fails to become better than her would eventually end up in prison.

7. Rabha, 2004:25-30

In due course of time all the big and the mighty from all over the world gathered at the king's palace responding to his announcement. Bidyabati appeared escorted by her friends in front of everyone. She easily answered everyone's questions put forward to her. One after another, everyone failed to match up to her intelligence and ended up in prison. Now nobody dared to pose a threat to challenge her intelligence or tried to match up to her.

Suddenly the son of a widow dared to come forward and stood to ask her three questions. The beautiful princess failed to answer his questions to the utter surprise of all present. To the query as to how he managed to defeat her in the game of intelligence, he said that all his questions are actually riddles which are related to his experience in his day to day life. The king was highly impressed by his intelligence and he now successfully won the princess and after their marriage he was made the king. He brought his mother along with him to the kingdom and together they lived happily ever after.

It is observed that in folktale the hero hits upon the right course of action unerringly. So in this particular tale we see the hero successfully defeating the heroine to make the narrative end in the expected line of male supremacy. Unless and until the hero wins, the story cannot reach to its expected culmination point. Moreover, the hero gets better of her as in our traditional society a wife cannot be accepted as superior to her husband. The heroine needs to get married fulfilling her father's dream in the usual social order. The hero, the anti-hero, subordinate characters, and props all precisely accomplish the specific narrative task that is assigned to them. But in the beginning heroine was mentioned to be exceptionally brilliant and intelligent whereas nothing of such is even uttered about the son of the widow. But at the end, when everyone fails, he comes from nowhere to hand down defeat to his much fancied rival in the battle of wits. It so happens as the requirement of the plot. Even then we get to see a woman who is also seen and appreciated for her wit and brilliance apart from her beauty. She also has a say in deciding about her groom, which is not very common in our tradition bound society. Freedom of choice of choosing her husband was given to her. But we have to remember one thing that she is a princess, a girl better placed in society, thus probably getting a chance to exercise freedom of choice.

Folktales break down the rich complexity of human beings. One cannot even speak of the characters of folktales as being intelligent. The tasks of cleverness that occur in the folktale are not truly tests of intelligence, as Charlotte Buhler has observed because “they are derived from such a specific situation that no cunning could hit upon it.....the solution depends on very specific aids that do not depend on the sagacity of the person but are offered to him by lucky chance.”

Barbara Gobrecht, in her studies on Russian folktales (Röhrich, 2008), has detected that women play much more active and independent role. In contrast to many of the Grimm’s fairy stories, many daughters of Czars and heroines in Russian folktales determine their own lives and choose their husbands themselves. This aspect of folktales is reflected in the Rabha folktale *Bidyabati and Bari Sali* (Son of a Widow). Bidyabati, the princess of Ratnagiri is very beautiful as well as brilliant. It was decided that among the prospective grooms whoever is successful in asking her three questions which she would fail to answer would be eligible to marry her and the unsuccessful ones would be thrown into prison. Thus the heroine had a role to play in the choice of her husband. She married the son of the widow who could make her silent with his questions.

4.1.8 *Mora Chorai Kenekai Hal* (How Peacock was born)⁸

In those days’ people in this earth used to be quite close to gods and goddesses as in those days people were quite pure and honest. So relation ship established between gods and human beings. Daughter of a god (*Risi Kanya*) came down from heaven and started living with a widow and her son. They were very happy as with her, luck had returned to them. There was drastic improvement in their condition. Like an ordinary girl she used to do all the household works and helped her mother in law. Both the *Risi Kanya* and the widow bonded well with each other.

But the wind god became restless and wanted the divine daughter back. One day the mother-in-law went out for community fishing and asked her not to touch her clothe which was kept outside,

8. Hakacham, 2009:69-72
Sarma, 2010:67-72

under any circumstances. But suddenly there was thunderstorm, and it took her away the moment she touched the clothe. She was transformed into a peahen. But she shared such a great bonding with both the mother-in-law and the son that at least once she comes in a year to visit them. (Two other versions of the tale are also there, where both the man and the woman turned into peacock and peahen).

In this tale we see positive bonding (quite uncommon) between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. This happened because the daughter-in-law belongs to the upper strata (from heaven). Thus there is no overt competition. To begin with the widowed mother in law accepted her superiority and both of them were clear that they do not threaten each other's space and position. Relationship between two women can be positive and healthy only if they are not threatened by each other's presence. The daughter-in-law on her part came down to earth and started living like an ordinary girl adjusting herself with their condition. Thus she showed respect and concern for her mother-in-law who in turn reciprocated her gesture. Moreover she brought with her good fortune to the poor family and there occurred visible improvement in their condition.

The mother in-law yearns for a daughter –in-law. She wants the daughter-in-law by her side to help out in the unrelenting housework. In a joint family a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are together responsible for accomplishing household work; the mother-in-law can delegate or share task according to her inclinations.

Rivalry between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law starts when mother-in-law tries to dominate. In her desire to dominate she appears like a symbol of patriarchy. In this tale another reason why the relationship between the two women is balanced might have something to do with the fact that her presence brought good luck and fortune to the poor family and she contributed in the drastic improvement of their life, a fact that can not be ignored by the mother-in-law. Moreover the daughter-in-law's heavenly connection might have put her in an advantageous position.

4.2 WOMEN AS PASSIVE VICTIM

A regular feature in both the folk tales and fairy tales is the innocent and simple woman who is slandered, punished and persecuted for no fault of her own.

The suffering and affliction of the women in the face of male violence is beautifully demonstrated in the tales in which the innocent wife is thrown out of the house and property but she somehow amazingly survives the act of cruelty and after many a painful experience gets back her former position. Her job is just to bear everything silently.

4.2.1 *Mokara aru Bon Mokara Kenekai Hal*⁹ (how spiders were born)

In this folktale, we have a poor family in the village with two grown up daughters who happen to be extremely beautiful. The village headman could see the amount of hardship the family is facing to run their family. So he gave shelter to the youngest daughter as the maid in the house. They were highly impressed by the poor girl's sincerity and expertise. So the village headman finally chooses her as the bride for his middle son. Two years had passed but unfortunately that girl could not give birth to a child. She was expert in all the other household works except weaving, which was considered an important skill among the Rabha tribe. Everything taken together she was no longer loved by her in-laws. They could not tolerate her anymore because of her inability to give birth to a child. The in-laws are also facing a dilemma as she was chosen by them only. So the mother-in-law started instigating her son against his wife. But the son used to love his wife very much. As a result he could not decide as to whose side he should take. He can neither offend his mother nor can he leave his beloved wife. Finding no solution to his problem, at one point of time he even thought of committing suicide. But finally he was compelled to leave his wife. One day he took her out to a distant forest and asked her to sit by a stream and promising her that he would return soon and also asked her not to move till he does not come. He did not return making her spend the whole night all alone in the forest.

She was very upset and could not understand why she had to suffer the plight. Soon she realized that there is none to help her out. So she had to accept her destiny. Out of hunger, she became thinner and thinner and one day turned into a wild spider.

Her elder sister's plight was similar to her. She was not at all skilled in house hold chores and as a result rejected by her husband. She

9. Hakacham, 2009:78-80

was confined inside the house and rebuked and ill-treated by her mother for her destiny. Extremely sad and dejected she also turned into a spider. Rabhas believed that as both the sisters lacked the skill of weaving for which they were deserted by their husbands and ultimately became spiders and keep on hanging like thread used in weaving in the spider web.

Small children still sing the song whenever they see a spider-

Sing-sing sigrang sing jajibrang-

Nok khalu khasulong sing nok drang|”

(We are two sisters living unitedly

Staying in a home and making thread) and also sing

Sing sing sing grang

Ganji nuwa chang?

(Sing sing sing grang

Tatat bohe Kun?)

Women in this tale are passive victims and sufferers and appear powerless against male aggression. Here the women in the forms of the mother in law and the mother help in sustaining and perpetuating patriarchal domination. Mother also rejected her own daughter as she was left helpless and abandoned by her husband. Sylvia Walby, in her work, “Theorizing Patriarchy” describes patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. The ideology of patriarchy is so deep rooted in our society that all kinds of violence and women subjugation appear obvious. And this has also become possible because of women’s internalization and acceptance of this patriarchal domination to a great extent. In her introduction to “Women in Patriarchy- Cross Cultural Readings” Jasbir Jain maintained that folktales throw up examples of how women have been abandoned or left unprotected either because of male rejection, persecution or authority. Rowe argued that to sustain a schema for femininity based on passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice suggests “that culture’s very survival depends upon a woman’s acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity” (Rowe 1991, 348).

Bearing a child is an obligation in Indian society because of social pressures. Woman is regarded primarily as a bearer of children and if she does not live up to expectation she is ridiculed and mocked by society and family as useless. The strong belief in children particularly a male child who carries forward the family tree emanates perhaps from the Hindu belief that if a man dies without a child he may never enter heaven. This kind of social belief acts against women. But tales are strangely silent about the inability of man to produce a child. The woman is generally blamed for not bearing the child but the man is never questioned. A woman is punished and she has to go through all sorts of humiliation although sometimes she is not to be blamed. Our patriarchal social set up refuses to acknowledge any problem related to the men. This view is amply reflected in this particular tale. The daughter in law was chosen by her in laws, was very hardworking, beautiful and capable in every household chore except weaving. But she was thrown out of her house on the ground that she could not bear a child and lacked one particular skill. All her positive qualities did not help her cause and was deserted by her husband.

4.2.2 *Champavati*¹⁰

There was a peasant who married for the second time after the death of his first wife. He had a daughter from his first wife, named Champavati. She was an attractive and accomplished girl but her step-mother could not tolerate her. She had to work harder than her step-sister. One day her father sent Champavati to the field to drive away the birds which used to eat the maturing paddy. The girl sat in the tall watch-house made for this special purpose and tried to drive away the birds. She tried to disperse the birds but got a different answer from a nearby wood who said that he will continue to the paddy till he marries Champavati. The girl looked around to find the speaker, but did not see anybody. The same thing happened the next day also. Terrified, the girl informed about it to her father. The father came to the field and searched in vain for the person. Finally facing towards the wood he proclaimed “whoever you are do come out. I give my word that I’ll offer you Champavati in marriage”. On hearing his proclamation a serpent glided out of the wood. The peasant was in a fix. After all how could he give

10. Rabha, Kabita: Bardamal, Goalpara, 2011

away his daughter to a serpent? But at the same time he was bound by his words. The step-mother also persuaded him to yield. So he brought the serpent home and offered Champavati to it. After the marriage rites were over both the husband and the wife were given a room to stay. The step mother was very happy to imagine that soon Champavati would be eaten up by the serpent husband and she would get rid of her. At night Champavati found that her serpent husband was in reality a beautiful God in disguise who during daytime changes into a serpent. Her husband lavished her with gifts and ornaments. At dawn she came out happy and smiling and her whole body covered with bright ornaments. Looking at her the step mother grew extremely jealous. Immediately she persuaded her husband to get a serpent for her daughter too.

Accordingly the peasant procured another serpent for his other daughter. When the marriage was over newly wedded couple was put in a room and the mother sat outside anticipating great happiness for her daughter. Unlike Champavati the fate of this girl was different. The serpent began to swallow the bride's leg onwards and she cried out saying she was feeling titillation in her body parts. But the eager mother, waiting outside thought that her son-in-law is giving her daughter various ornaments for which she might have felt titillation in various parts of her body. The daughter cried out the last time and became silent after this. Next morning the girl was not to be seen; only the serpent was lying with its belly full.

Prafulladatta Goswami in his Introduction to *Tales of Assam* observed that "few tales except perhaps mythological and etiological ones-are the exclusive property of any particular community or language group. When people live together in the same geographical area and have had close contacts for centuries tales from one group tend to pass on to another group". A close parallel to this story is also found among the Assamese people with a little variation. Moreover Bodos, Rabhas, Karbis, Tiwas, Missings, Jalungs, Deuris are bilingual tribes within Assam. Thus some tales which are found among Rabhas are also equally popular among Assamese speakers.

Sudhir Kakar, the well known Indian psychoanalyst has examined the Indian stories in a psychoanalytic perspective, in his book *Intimate Relations* (Sudhir Kakar, 1989:56-57). Kakar elaborates on the symbolism of snake by

citing the well-known concept of the snake lover in Indian tales. The snake lover in Indian tales, says Kakar, is different from the animal lovers found in Western folktales. In the western tales, the lover is first the animal which transforms into a handsome youth who marries the heroine. This interpretation has been associated with the message that a woman should shed her aversion towards sex as animal-like. In the Indian situation, Kakar states the snake lover is an idealized phallus which helps the girl to overcome her fear of it. In this tale *Champavati*, the girl named Champavati was married to a cobra but her serpent husband turns out to be a beautiful god in disguise. He revealed himself in the first night and lavished Champavati with gifts and ornaments and made her happy. The next day when she comes out of her room, she was found to be very happy and smiling much to the astonishment of her step-mother. Immediately she also desired a serpent groom for her own daughter as by now she is convinced that a serpent would be the best husband for her daughter as well.

Again in cases where the husbands have gone astray, the wife gets consolation with the fantasy of the idealized phallus, which is expressed in the form of a snake lover. At this point we can refer to the play *Nagitmandala* by Girish Karnad, which tells the tale of a beautiful maiden whose husband has a mistress. Accidentally she meets with a cobra in the disguise of her husband and she bears him a child. An almost similar kind of tale is found in Kannada named *Serpent Lover* mentioned by Ramanujan in his article "Towards a Counter System: Women's Tales" (Dharwadker, 1999). These are also additional proof that the snake is considered to be the ideal lover. Here Ramanujan mentioned that the snake is a benign figure. He is often a transformed brother, a husband, a grateful helper, a father figure, or the best of lovers who gives the woman every possible happiness.

Although in the case of the step mother's daughter things did not turn out to be as happy and fulfilling as was expected. Finding Champavati happy and contented the jealous step mother found a serpent for her daughter too but only to be killed by it. This of course shows the triumph of good over evil. As the step mother was jealous and her intention was never good, she was punished.

The step-mother has maternal feelings for her own children despite her wickedness. She treats her own children well. The meanness she displays toward the orphan is often caused by jealousy she feels toward her co-wife. A wicked step-mother is always a bad wife by being a jealous wife. In most cases these young orphan girls have lost their mothers and are persecuted by wicked step-mother, as it happened with Champavati. Interestingly a step mother is a type, wicked and cruel to the core as perceived by the society. She is not treated as an independent individual. The character of the mother is not well represented but she is nearly always positive influence which fits the teaching of the tradition since maternity is a highly respected and desirable state. Wicked step mothers are abundant and can be explained by the fact that through them one can show in the same story many aspects of woman and consequently draw multiple lessons. The main purpose of their presence is to present the plight of persecuted innocence. This never fails to awaken the interest of the entire community. She is usually ordered (like Champavati) to accomplish an impossible task which will involve her in multiple adventures. The child is obedient, polite and respectful toward her elders and also respects the religious taboos without even questioning them. These qualities very much appreciated in girls, win her the protection of the gods and the spirits of the bush. In this story, Champavati who was married to a serpent actually turned into a beautiful god at night and showering her with gifts and love and making her happy and contented. These virtues in the orphan girl are also the proof that her real mother has been successful in her education. The mother raises and educates the daughter and the community appreciates such an upbringing. Her virtues win her the supreme reward- happy marriage. By winning a beautiful husband she will become the envy of the stepmother and the stepsisters.

Like other beast-groom stories (Aarne-Thompson tale type 425C), where the groom is toad, or cobra or python probably originated as a story about obedience, but in so far as it pivots on the ownership and disposal of women it has specific application to arranged marriages and hence affirms the "rightness" of patriarchy. A girl entering such an arrangement may well feel frightened, but she is reassured that if carefully obeyed the beast could turn out to

be an angel as it happened with Champavati. Her python husband turned out to be a handsome God full of love and affection for her. The voice of the father is the authority. His words are final and needs to be kept at all cost. This also reaffirms the society's belief that unquestionably oblizing and submissive woman becomes happy in the long run.

4.2.3 *Sita's test by fire*¹¹

Ravana, the king of Lanka, abducted Sita during their exile. Rama after killing *rakshasa* (demon) King Ravana rescued Sita and brought her back to Ayodhya. But many subjects were skeptical of Sita's purity.

Sita Devi was matchless in her beauty and virtues. Moreover she was a good painter. One day she was talking with her sister-in-laws and companions about Lanka and Ravana. They asked her to draw a portrait of Ravana so that they can also know how wicked Ravana physically looked like. Sita said that although she did not see the sinner, but happened to see his reflection on ocean water while he was carrying her after abduction. On their repeated requests she drew the portrait and the picture held all of them spellbound. The story of the picture spread among the women folk and from women it reached men, and finally to Rama. Many subjects, who were already in doubt, now got their doubts confirmed. Rama cherished the ambition to be a popular king of *Ayodhya*. This development shocked him and mistrust, impatience and unhappiness gripped his otherwise calm mind. So he asked Sita to prove her chastity. Sita became utterly shocked and speechless. Rama asked Sita to be exonerated from the blemish through evidence by an authentic witness. He was very eager to be known as a liberal and popular king. Unable to find a suitable witness to the satisfaction of everybody who could vouch for every second of Sita's stay in Lanka, Rama finally ordered the removal of Sita's blemish in a test through fire. Everybody gathered at the pyre constructed for Sita's test. She stood unmoved in the burning fire with folded hand for salvation. She came out of the flames unscathed, standing motionless amid black embers. All people gathered there described Sita as a chaste woman. An emotion of peace and happiness rippled through Rama's mind.

11. Rabha, 1977:120-126
Sarma, 2010:34-38

Here we find the agony of Sita, the beloved wife of Lord Rama, the king of *Ayodhya*. It so happened that beautiful Sita, was kidnapped by Ravana, the king of Lanka who kept her in Asoka forest with evil intention. But he did not succeed in seducing Sita who was as pure as ever. After returning to Ajodhya subjects started talking about Sita's chastity. Sita, the Queen appeared as a passive figure. As a king Rama wanted to be loved by his subjects. So to please his subjects and to keep his image intact he asked Sita to prove her chastity and innocence. This proves the fact that every woman has to undergo this kind of humiliation and mental trauma irrespective of whether she is a queen or a beggar. In spite of the fact that Rama knew only too well that his beloved Sita is pure and chaste, he became insensitive towards her in order to protect his image as a king. Similarly in a Kangra folk tale "Daughter, My little Bread" the king had no regard for his wife's life. The king did not care if his queen died, for, as he said there were always other queens to be had. In making explicit the devaluing of women's lives and easy replacability of wives, these upper caste women's tales also seemed to set a cultural double standard in ironic relief. For among the upper castes men were allowed co-wives [particularly if one had not produced a son and heir]. Further, if a wife died, the man invariably remarried, needing someone to serve him and his children. Yet upper caste widows were required to live a celibate life, hemmed in by ritual restrictions.

The male centered view of human life goes on to privilege one gender over another. Man has not only been viewed as the "master" but also as the protector and the bread earner, a belief which in large measure is a myth. Epics and folktales alike throw up examples of how women have been abandoned or left unprotected either because of the turn of events(as in the case of Sita),or because of male rejection, persecution or authority. But this myth has also constructed its own idea of masculinity, of men as strong, infallible creatures, as those who have a right to authority, respect, and dignity. Religion which forms a greater aspect of one's culture carries its gender related bias in its texts. For example, Hindu religion is an embodiment of patriarchal dominance. Practically most part of the Hindu mythology focus on the sacrificing nature and unquestionable loyalty of women. As for instance we can show the

uncomplaining image of Sita, who worshipped her husband and could tolerate all atrocities of the society and her husband. She could jump into fire and even went on an exile to the forest all alone to prove her chastity and loyalty. This act of Sita fits in well with the Indian expectation of women as obedient, passive, uncomplaining, and ever ready to adjust and compromise, self-effacing, powerless, submissive, vulnerable etc. and thereby Sita qualifies as the ideal heroine of mythology.

Although Sita's story is pan Indian, and cannot be considered a Rabha folktale as such, yet we can see this story as the influence of Hinduism and Hindu Mythology in their traditional way of life. The story is found among Pati Rabhas who have a greater assimilation with Assamese culture and society. A great majority of Rabhas follow Hinduism and as such Sita who is highly revered by Hindus for her sacrifices, found her way in Rabha tales as well. We also know that every tale travels from its point of origin, adding local and regional variation to it.

4.2.4 *Bisanmati*¹²

Once a merchant had a very beautiful daughter named Bisanmati. Her mother died when she was very young. The merchant married again to relieve the pain of his daughter in the absence of her mother. But things did not turn out as he expected. The step mother instead of treating her well started torturing her in the slightest pretext. From morning to night she worked inside the household. Still the step-mother was not satisfied. She used to make her life hell. But the poor girl used to bear every torture without uttering a word. She could not even complain to her father fearing further trouble. Once the father ventured out for business purpose. Before leaving he gave the responsibility of Bisanmati to her stepmother and asked her to take good care of her. But with the departure of the father, her fate also deserted her and eventually the cruel step mother killed her. After that she was transformed into a bottle guard plant. She used to narrate her plight if someone came to pluck a guard from that tree. Hearing this the step mother uprooted the tree and burnt it. Out of the fire a beautiful bird (*Kapau*) came out. When her father returned she wept and told her story

12. Rabha, 2004:42-54

to him. The father brought a diamond necklace for her whom he now gave to the bird and the step mother was punished.

In this tale the conduct and nature of the step-mother is highlighted. Thus creating sympathy for the nubile girl who was presented as helpless, obedient, hard-working and yet totally unhappy. She had already lost her mother; the father was also away on a business trip who could have been her protector. This uncomplainingly submissive nature is what is expected of a woman and she receives sympathy because of that. The stepmother and her cruel nature are put in contrast with the innocence and the helplessness of the girl who does not have anyone to turn to for help. The meanness she showed towards the orphan is often caused by jealousy she feels for her co-wife, who might be living or dead. Again her behaviour must have something to do with her feeling of insecurity (psychological rather than real). As the second wife she might have wanted to secure her place and position in the new household, in the life of her husband. Thus in order to get a place of prominence in her husband's life, she tries to distance the step-daughter from the father. She refuses to share the space with the other women in her husband's life-i.e. either the co-wife or the step-daughter. To get a secured future for her own daughter she tries to negate everything that the step daughter deserves-comfort and happiness. As a wife she seeks the favour of the father through her progeny.

This act of jealousy is a negative trait and is punished as it happened in the end of the tale where the step-mother is punished by the father and the passive daughter who suffered all torture and humiliation is rewarded with a diamond necklace. She is obedient, polite and respectful towards her elder ones and thus qualifies as an ideal girl.

Quite expectedly, jealousy is always punished. According to the tradition, it not only destroys conjugal life but also shows distinct lack of respect for the male and contradicts the wisdom of the proverb "the woman must tremble before the man". It can also be considered a revolt against the popular tradition because from ancient times polygamous men are accepted unconditionally by society without raising an eyebrow. Women had always submitted on the ground that it

was for the common good, and women had to adjust and compromise her position for the man and his family.

The “habits” (as described by Urmilaji to Kirin Narayan while narrating stories to her in Mondays on the Dark Nights of the Moon) of the step mother had to do with systematically mistreating children of a different marriage while favouring their own children.

4.2.5 *Bhutuni Budhi aru bari Sali* (the witch and the son of a widow)¹³

In Chandan Nagar an old lady used to live. She knew wild magic and had a bird which she protected and kept inside the house with extreme precaution. The old woman who is actually a witch moves out at night and kills and eats whatever she gets outside- from animals to human beings. But while returning home in the morning she changes into the guise of a human being. She is also very clever and does not do anything to irritate her neighbours or arouse their doubt.

She also moves as beggar from one place to another and takes shelter in people’s houses and takes advantage of their virtue. Once she reached the home of a widow named Hima who had a five years old son called Ratan. Her husband died before the birth of her son. So the villagers accused her of being unfaithful, and was put in exile. Nobody kept any relation with her. She was living all alone by herself with her son. So happily she gave refuge to the old lady. The witch on her part liked the fact that Hima was alone. At night after dinner every one went to bed. Then the witch in the guise of an old lady came to her original self and eaten Hima. But the witch felt pity for her son and spared Ratan. She wanted to keep Ratan as her company. Ratan could see how his mother was eaten and killed in front of his eyes. As he was very young he could not do anything but he promised himself that he would take revenge on the old lady one day. In the course of time the young boy attained manhood and now was keen to take revenge. He came to know about the secret of her life that it is in the bird that her life is preserved. So one day he killed the bird (*Kapau*) and thus the life of the witch came to an end. Everyone praised the orphan for his courage, intelligence and determination.

13. Rabha, 2004:61-68

Along with the stepmother another negative female stereotype in the folktales is the witch. In folktales witches are situated right on the borderline between the realm of the human and the realm of the demonic. Being a demonic individual the witch can change her appearance. She makes herself unrecognizable by taking on the looks of another woman, transforming herself into an animal, or into an object. The home of a witch is a long way away from human habitation. The surrounding of the witches home belong to the realm of devil and signify a danger zone. Eating human flesh and the power of metamorphosis are two attributes of demons. In addition an extremely thick skin and a lack of human sensitivity are further attributes. And demons can take on all kinds of forms (Narayan, 1997:187).

Here we have two women-one is active, evil, powerful and doing things in her own way. She is a witch. The other is a passive woman, a victim, a woman ostracized by the society for no fault of her own. She was accused of infidelity as she gave birth to her son after the death of her husband. Thus here we see patriarchal world view where women are at the receiving end. Women's voice is muted. This shows the cultural double standard of our patriarchal society where women need to prove her innocence all the time. She was not given a sympathetic understanding. She was killed by a witch, an event witnessed by her son. The son here is the representative of patriarchal world order as the revenger whose duty was to give justice to his mother. As a grown up man he is the symbol of the male dominated society. The image of male as the protector of woman percolates down to the child from his early days. Thus the son is an active agent. The woman was so passive that she did not protest the injustice meted against her. Ultimately help from a male (her son) is needed to get justice even if after death.

The witch in the tale possesses magical power which allows her to change her appearance to suit her purpose. She is shrewd and thus does not go for confrontation with people to avoid suspicion around her. This was her survival strategy. She took advantage of the loneliness and ostracized state of the passive, helpless woman. As a widow she was helpless, a condition over which she does not have any control. She lost her husband, a man who was supposed to protect her. Struggle started for her and eventually was eaten and got killed by a witch.

Finally she received justice through a man (her son). Thus change from a victim to getting justice came only through the man in her life. She became a victim as she lacked a man (husband) in her life and got justice although after death, by a man (son). A woman's life is viewed only in relation to the man in her life. She does not have an independent existence. Her happiness, suffering, hope, exploitation, sadness all are related to the presence of men in her life-be it father, brother, husband, son, lover etc. Widowhood is a curse in our society and a widow has to undergo a lot of suffering and torture from the society.

4.3 ACTIVE AND INTELLIGENT WOMEN

In a few folktales women figure as active and intelligent agents who save or rescue her husband or village from a critical situation through their courage, presence of mind. But it is worth mentioning here that the act of intelligence is of fairly simple nature.

4.3.1 *Trish Marka Paluwan* (a wrestler who killed 30 mosquitoes in one slap)¹⁴

There was a farmer's family in a certain village. They had only three members in their family-parents and their only son. The son was extremely lazy and idle; he simply does not do anything. In short he was good for nothing type. His parents were very angry at their son's conduct because he was a strongly built handsome and healthy young man. He used to eat and sleep only. So they brought a bride for him hoping that things might change for better. They expected that better sense would prevail upon him as he is now a married man. But unfortunately he did not change. In an attempt to change him, the parents asked them to live separately. They thought that this time he would have to work to sustain himself and his wife. Nothing had changed. This time his wife was compelled to go outside and beg for a living. The wife was utterly frustrated at this because she could not bear the fact that a strong and stout person like him is spending his time idly, not doing anything for the family. As a result she used to rebuke him. But the idle and worthless person he was, he used to listen to her outburst silently. Finally one day he came out of the house and asked for a bamboo from a neighbor. The owner thought in his mind, "What will

14. Rabha, Bhubin: Loharghat, 2012

this idle person do with a bamboo? Let me give him and see what he does with this". He brought the bamboo and throughout the day he made *tangal* (made from bamboo to tie a knot, flexible). Their house was situated near the forest. So while he was working mosquitoes surrounded him. The wife came out to see what he was doing and found that mosquitoes are all over his legs. She tried to make him see sense, "what has happened to you? Don't you see that mosquitoes were sucking your blood?" He realized about this only after hearing his wife's voice. He just put a big slap over his leg and instantly his hand is filled with blood. He told his wife, "See, thirty mosquitoes got killed in one slap. I am a *trish marka paluwan* (a wrestler who could kill 30 mosquitoes at a go)". Now the wife, getting something to feel proud about her husband and his achievement, went on telling about this while fetching water, working in the field etc. Now talk spread like fire and one day it reached the king.

On the other hand everyday one cow was missing from the king's cowshed. A tiger takes away one cow everyday. But nobody could kill the tiger. All the hunters employed failed and king felt helpless as to how to sort out the problem. Then as he heard about *trish marka paluwan*, he asked his men to bring the person to his court. This person got scared. He thought that he must have done something drastically wrong otherwise why there would be a call from the king. The king asked him to kill the tiger which was creating nuisance. In his mind he thought that I have only killed mosquitoes, but neither I nor my forefathers had ever killed a tiger. He left king's court without uttering a word. When he reached home, looking at him his wife thought "something is wrong. Otherwise why he is looking so down and out?" when she asked him what has happened, he said, "You have put me in trouble, you told everybody that I am a *trish marka paluwan* and the king thought me as a real *paluwan* (wrestler) and asked me to kill the tiger. Now his wife also got worried. She never thought that her proclamation would lead her husband into real trouble. After discussion they decided to leave that village. As they did not have money he decided to steal a cow from the king's cowshed. The king wont even know as he would think that tiger has eaten one more cow. In the mean time by selling the cow they will be able to live for some day.

It was too dark at night. Taking advantage of darkness he stepped into the king's cowshed. By that time the tiger has already entered the cowshed and trying to find out a cow of his choice. *Trish*

marka paluwan unknowingly has put his hand on the tiger instead of the cow. In his mind he thought this cow will be the best (actually the tiger) as its body is very smooth and strong. Immediately he captured the tiger tightly with the rope he took along with him. Now the tiger thought, "I am in danger". The tiger had already heard about the reputation of the *paluwan* as a very strong person. The *paluwan* meanwhile pulled the rope and reached home. At home he tied the tiger along with a bamboo solidly. He called his wife to see his success. The wife came out with a lamp and was astonished to find a big tiger. She was speechless. The man realized what he did only after watching his wife's reaction. He brought the much wanted tiger, thinking of it as a cow. Both of them went inside and locked the door tightly. In the morning out of fear both of them did not come out of their house. The king to his utter surprise found that on the last night the tiger did not take his cow and thought that this must have happened because of *paluwan*. To see the tiger by his own eyes he came to *paluwan's* house along with his minister. He found the tiger at his place closely roped in the courtyard. Listening to peoples voice the wife came out. When asked about her husband the intelligent wife said, "King, he was extremely tired and now he is deep in sleep as throughout the night he fought with the tiger before finally winning over it". When the king asked her to make him awake she did it. With sleep in his eyes he came out. The king was very pleased at his feat and honoured him with cash. After that they lived happily with that money.

In our society marriage or bringing a wife for an idle, ineffective, worthless son is thought to be a corrective measure, a way to bring in change in the man. This probably hints at two things- on the one hand a woman can be given to a worthless man in marriage. His chief quality is that he is a man and he does not require any other qualification for marriage. He does not need to prove himself as an eligible person. On the other hand it also says indirectly about woman's capacity to change a person. That way society in some form acknowledges woman's inner strength, her strong mental makeup.

It is believed that responsibility which comes with marriage might bring in a kind of positive change in the idle one. In the patriarchal society, the duty of running the family rests with the male member, the husband after marriage. It was the primary duty of the husband to secure food and a living for the family. Woman is supposed to work within the four walls of the family. Thus his parents

thought that after they have asked him to live independently with his wife and sustain both of them, he would be compelled to work this time as now his wife is solely dependent on him.

Here we get an indirect hint on women's nature. Women can not keep things within themselves. They share things which might prove to be dangerous sometimes. Here the wife also kept on boasting to everyone calling her husband *trish marka paluwan*. But we can not blame the woman for it completely. If we try to understand her psychology we would find that since her husband was sitting idle, doing nothing so far, one act of his i.e. killing of 30 mosquitoes in one single slap gave her reason enough to speak positively about her husband. She took it as a matter of pride to be shared among her circle even if she added a little color to the story. But her intention was totally harmless. As a wife, like every woman in our society, she wished to see her husband as a capable person. As a wife she felt ashamed of her husband till the incident occurred. Her sharing is her way of showing to the world that her husband is not worthless; rather he is a powerful and strong person.

The wife of *Trish marka paluwan* was active and intelligent. When her husband remained inactive, sat idle at home she used to work and go out in order to manage a living. Although at one point in the tale her tongue had thrown her husband into trouble but later on in front of the King she managed the situation quite intelligently. She gave the impression that her husband was tired after capturing the tiger and was sleeping. Reality was something different. She applied her intelligence and turned the situation to their advantage. As a result her husband was honoured and paid handsomely by the king. Finally their hardship came to an end. Intelligence in the woman brought positive change in her husband's fortune.

4.3.2 *Kachmoni*¹⁵

A widow had two sons. The elder's name was Ganju and the younger one was Hanju. Ganju was intelligent and Hanju was a fool. After Ganju's marriage disputes arose between the two brothers and

15. Rabha, 1977:6-14
Sarma, 2010:44-50

one day it reached its peak and as a result properties were divided between them. But the division was an unequal one, where the intelligent brother took all the benefits of the division, giving practically nothing to the foolish one. But the foolish one later on realized that he had been deprived by his elder brother. Out of anger and frustration he began to chop off the jackfruit trees of his share. His elder brother saw the mess he had made and thrashed him severely. He was so badly treated that one night Hanju left home for good.

During his journey he came across a man whom he addressed as "father-in-law". The man said I am still unmarried. How can I be your father in law?" "After your marriage if a girl is born and I marry her, then will you not be my father-in-law?" thinking him to be a lunatic, the man said smilingly, "yes, yes, but when my marriage will be solemnized?" I am in need of money. Hanju promised that he would arrange both money and bride for him. Accordingly he arranged for the man's marriage. He did all the hard work. After a year, a girl was born, Hanju baptized her as Kachmoni. Soon after her birth, her father Ginal died.

With the attainment of marriageable age, according to the previous agreement, her mother prepared for her marriage. One day Kachmoni went to the river. At that time a merchant's boat was passing through. Seeing the beautiful girl, he forcefully dragged her to his boat and then let the boat sail off.

Hearing the news of Kachmoni's kidnap her mother began to weep aloud. Hanju consoled her and set off in search of Kachmoni. He promised to find her out. He reached the merchant's village, after searching for Kachmoni here and there. He told the story of Kachmoni to one family. They also agreed that it is a great sin to lie and a false step to kidnap a lonely and hapless girl. They offered all help to rescue her. The *Ojha* (who treats diseases and examines the omens) of this merchant also promised to help. Accordingly he managed a fisherman who would take her to a different village. As planned, the girl went to the bank of the river, but ill luck had it that at that very moment the dreaded dacoit of the land, Bagha with his assistant turned up on the bank. Seeing such a beautiful girl at dawn, Bagha forcibly dragged her to boat. She cried aloud. He promised to marry her but Kachmoni said "I am betrothed. You will be committing a sin". He refused to term it as sin.

While the dacoits were moving with Kachmoni, they saw some passers by who were passing through the forest with booties on their heads. They anchored the boat and marched to attack the passers by. Meanwhile Kachmoni remained alone in the boat. The prince, the son of the minister and the army general of a different land arrived at that place for hunting. Having found the girl alone in the boat, every one of them wished to have her as his wife. Argument and counter argument started as to who had the right over the girl. Kachmoni was an intelligent girl. She said "please don't quarrel amongst you. I shall accept him (as my husband) who after running to the forest can bring a bouquet of wild flowers. They agreed to her proposal and taking off their swords and clothes, they ran into the forest to fetch bouquets of flowers. It was in the flash of a moment that the girl wore male attire and took the sword of one of them; then mounting a horse she fled away swiftly, taking the remaining clothes with her. Kachmoni wore the male disguise as it might be necessary for her. She reached Rangdan Kingdom. The king there had no son. With the dress of a male Kachmoni disclosed her identity before the king as the orphaned son of a hero clan. She sought refuse with the king. The king was attracted by "his" behaviour, style of work and intelligence and proposed that "he" marry his only daughter Kachmati. The male dressed Kachmoni replied "oh king I abide by your proposal. But before I marry her, she will first have to marry my sword. Only after that I shall give my consent to this marriage". The king accepting this proposal, arranged for Kachmati's marriage to the sword, as per social custom.

The king began to run his kingdom with the counsel of Kachmoni who was in disguise. One day she counseled the king "your majesty should arrange to dig a big tank and announce throughout the kingdom that whoever be able to pickup Kachmoni bead thrown into the tank by diving would be well rewarded". Accordingly the king made the public announcement throughout the kingdom. Everybody responded to the announcement perhaps with the hope that if he could win the King's test he would be able to claim Kachmati, the only daughter of the king.

Kachmoni advised the King that as soon as the aspirants would arrive, they should be imprisoned. Abiding by her counsel the King imprisoned all of them.

Hanju who roamed at random like a maniac also heard the King's proclamation and as he was aware of the *kachmoni* seed, he too

turned up at the royal courtyard. After sometime, Hanju and Kachmoni got familiar with each other. Thereafter Kachmoni brought him to the King and narrated all the tragedies of their past life. She told the King “he is your son -in -law and I am your daughter”. As all the secrets were revealed, the King was happy and he got the marriage accomplished gorgeously. On that occasion all the prisoners were released. Everyone realized their mistake and blessed the couple. Kachmoni brought her mother Batachoik, her rescuer Chengman Ojha and his wife Chengmani to the royal court. Peace, prosperity and happiness were restored to the kingdom.

If we analyze the tale we see that Kachmoni’s marriage was fixed even before her birth, in a conversation between her father who was at that point of time not even married, and her would be husband. From birth to death the relationship between a man and a woman is that of owning and belonging. Man owns woman as he owns other material objects and she belongs to him, be it father, brother, husband or son. She is denied an identity of her own. Thus regarding marriage, taking consent of the girl in question was not taken as an important criterion. This reflects a lot on women’s right in deciding on her life. When she was kidnapped, she needed the help of a male Ojha to rescue her. Till then her principal function was thematic, as she occupies the important position of victim. Torbong Lundell in her article “Folktale heroines and the Type and Motif Indexes” pointed that both heroes and heroines in the folktales need and receive help to complete their tasks and overcome obstacles. They meet helpers in the form of animals, old women and men, magic objects and supernatural creatures who carry the protagonist from one place to another or give good advice. Helpers are supportive and their power is limited. Lundell has further pointed out that careful investigation of the folklore material shows that the model for female conduct reflected in folktale over a wide geographical area is far from confined to the submissive beauty. There is one type of tale (Armor and Psyche type) where heroines must undergo a series of ordeals and prove her intelligence and resourcefulness before she rediscovers her lost husband.

But when she managed to flee successfully from the clutches of different men, using her intelligence, then also she needed the guise of a man. In our

societies, particularly in the patriarchal set up, the courage and intelligence of females are not acknowledged; it becomes “help” for the male hero. In this particular tale and in many other tales, a female protagonist has to disguise as a male to achieve her goal of rescuing her husband or beloved or male kin from the adversaries or villains. But their bravery or intelligence or presence of mind or capacity of acting under pressure do not make them heroes but helpers, because sphere of their action is different from what the male-dominated society has assigned to them.

She could act only in the guise of a man and accomplished her mission of finding Hanju her husband in the role of the man. Just being woman she could not possibly have achieved her goal. Folklorist Margaret Mill observed that women most often act like men to gain mobility in the outside world, both to avoid sexual contact and to rescue family members (mostly males) who are confined or incapacitated. (In Jordan and Kalcik, 1985:195) but Kachmoni surely qualifies as an active heroine though partially, as she became instrumental in reviving the fortune of her husband. Moreover she also brought back happiness to the lives of her mother and the *ojha* who helped in her mission. The characteristics pattern of woman centered tales, according to Ramanujan as observed in his article, “Towards a Counter System: Women’s Tales” (Dharwadker,1999), begins with a first union often a marriage, followed by a separation, and ending in reunion and a firmer bonding between the woman and her spouse. In this tale also Hanju and Kachmoni got separated after they were engaged, followed by a lot of trial and tribulation for both the man and the woman and finally they were united at the end by the act of intelligence of the heroine. She became instrumental in bringing back the happiness in their life and also to the lives of people who were supportive of her in her worst times. To quote Ramanujan again here is relevant:

In the woman centered tales, as in their classical analogues of Sakuntala or Savitri, it does not seem enough for a woman to be married. She has to earn her husband, her married state, through *a rite de passage*, a period of unmerited suffering.

4.3.3 A Tiger and an Old Man¹⁶

A very ferocious tiger started creating problems for the entire village demanding different eatables every now and then. He also ate different domestic animals of the villagers. The villagers did not have any idea about how to tackle this problem. One day the tiger demanded *pitha* (home made bread) from an old man in lieu of allowing him to safely collect firewood from the forest. The wife of the old man listened to the demand but she did not become terrified instead decided to teach the tiger a lesson so that the menace could be stopped once and for all. The old man in the beginning tried to dissuade her fearing the consequence if something goes wrong. But the old lady was quite confident of herself and made her plan. Accordingly the woman prepared *pitha* with lime stone powder and offered it to him. The tiger could not sense the danger and ate it happily and left for the forest. But on his way uneasy gripped him and he could not tolerate the itching caused by the lime stone and fell dead. Villagers were very pleased at her act of intelligence and courage, and lavishly gifted her many things as a reward for her achievements.

This tale presents us with a formidable old woman who by using her intelligence and presence of mind rescued the village from the fury of the powerful tiger who was creating havoc on the poor and helpless villagers. Although we get passive victim and sufferers, dependent women in many folktales, but the ever-patient, uncomplainingly submissive woman is not the unique type of woman we find in the folktales. There are many examples of female cleverness and independence as we have seen in this particular folktale. The adventurous and leadership qualities of a folktale heroine, in this case the old woman, are ignored. Aarne and Thompson in their type and motif indexes of folktales seem to downplay female activity and capability. There seems to be different standards for evaluating behavior of women and men. And in some labeling male is given the credit instead of the female in the title. This happened in this particular tale also where the man was passive and it is the woman's able leadership quality, fearlessness and capable handling of the situation which saved

16. Rabha, 1977:80-85
Sarma, 2010:86-90

everyone from impending danger. It is important here to mention that parallel to this tale is also found among the Bodos and also among the Assamese.

4.4 WOMEN AS TRANSGRESSOR

When women go beyond the limit set by patriarchal society, their act is termed as subversion. Ramanujan maintains that subversion/inversion of a normal order or relation is found in folktales. According to him in folktales women have the courage to come out of subjugation of male domination. Unlike real life, in tales women tried to come out and assert themselves. But women who cross the boundary of their traditional role are termed transgressors by the dominant male order.

4.4.1 *Bangkhong aru Natrong Keneke Hal* (how the insects were formed)¹⁷

There lived two sisters named Bangkhong and Natrong. They used to sing and dance beautifully. Because of their singing and dancing talent, people used to praise them. But there were also people who were jealous of them and used to spread rumour surrounding them. Listening to these rumours their maternal uncle and their brother got very angry and started rebuking them. The sisters were very unhappy but still they could not stop singing and dancing as this was their passion. So whenever they got a chance, they would sing.

Once again they were threatened to give up their singing. Even fear of punishment could not prevent them from pursuing their passion. Out of sheer frustration and anger, the maternal uncle lost his patience and cursed them (his niece) to die. The curse became a reality and both the sisters died. Their bodies were not cremated, instead were kept in two holes dugged to keep their body. From those two holes eventually two insects were born. Their name was Bangkhong (bigger *oichiringa*, an insect) and Natrong (smaller *oichiringa*, another insect) respectively. Even then, they used to sing like this-

Neither we are ashamed of our brother
 Nor we are afraid of our uncle (maternal)
 Not afraid, not afraid, we will sing and dance all the time.

17. Hakacham, 2009:81

The song in Rabha-*Mamanbo ki racha-dadanaba brachai**Sayrugun sai-fusai fusai**Ki rachai brachai- Ki rachai brachai*

We can find in the tale that singing and dancing were the passions of both the sisters for which they got praise and criticism along with curse from family members. But even then they were not afraid to pursue their passion and resisted the unjustified dictates and control of their male elders in their own way. They say “not afraid, not afraid, we will sing and dance all the time....” These two girls are not treated as equals as per men who can have a mind of their own and are allowed to exercise freedom of choice.

If we analyze the tale from a particular feminist perspective we see that in male dominated societies man is central and woman is the “other”, repressed, ignored, and pushed to the margins and her ardent wish is to be recognized as a human being. In this context Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that women were constrained by the societal roles and as such could not exercise their essential freedom. She asked “when women were to be defined in relation to men how could they exist as individuals and claim their essential freedom?” Thus the two sisters were prohibited from pursuing their passion- singing and dancing as it is not considered right and proper by their male elders. Man has demarcated space- the public sphere as his own domain and private sphere as woman’s space. Thus their maternal uncle and brothers were opposed to their singing and dancing as it requires them to venture out into the public domain of man as hailed by patriarchal social order. Women’s domestic role as daughters, wives or mothers are stressed, denying them their subject position.

Beauvoir also commented that “to be feminine is to appear weak, futile and docile. The young girl is supposed not only to deck herself out, to make herself ready and to repress her spontaneity and replace it with the studied grace and charm taught to her by her elders. Any assertion will diminish her femininity and attractiveness” (Beauvoir 1972,359). These two sisters were also asked to curb their spontaneity in order to please the elders in the family. But they choose to resist and decided to continue with their passion for which they were cursed by

their maternal uncle. This is how the male world reacts to any assertion by a woman to restore her freedom and identity. They decided to “sing and dance all the time...” It is not easy for women to cast aside the garb of the “secondary” and acquire human status. The sisters resisted to the unjust demand of their male elders and reaffirmed their desire to continue with their passion. They choose not to be submissive and docile, but came out strong as individuals. Edward R. Lee observes in *Psyche as Hero* that patriarchy creates role model for people which are inhibiting and stereotypical but when a woman finds herself capable of breaking chains of patriarchal cultures around her and acts in this direction she becomes a woman hero, “within this context- patriarchal, hostile pre-occupied with rank-the woman hero is an usage of anti-thesis. Different from male-her sex her sign-she threatens his authority and that of the system she sustains”. Thus “the male picture of the ideal woman ...usually omits the role of revolutionary activist” and folklore offers “glimpses of women’s resentment of the repressive role given to them” (Jordan in Jordan and Kalcik 1985:42-43).

4.4.2 *Bachelor Kartik*¹⁸

In this tale Lord Shiva gave Parvati the responsibility of arranging the marriage ceremony of their son Kartik to beautiful Usha. But Parvati grew jealous of Usha and thus was reluctant to accept Usha as the bride for her handsome son Kartik. Conflict had started brewing in her mind.

To fulfill her aim of not letting her son marry Usha, she very cunningly tried to blackmail Kartik emotionally. Parvati said that if Kartik brings Usha to their home as his bride then she would torture his mother to the extent of not giving her enough food to eat. Kartik was very upset at this. Being a very devoted son he promised to his mother that he would remain a bachelor throughout his life.

Parvati was passionately attracted to her son Kartik. One day she asked her own son to satisfy her immoral desire. Kartik could not believe his ears and told his mother that he could not commit such a sin. She was so desperate fulfill her lust that she told Kartik that even if it is a sin he is bound by promise to satisfy her. She even reasoned that it is

18. Rabha, 1977:116-119
Sarma, 2010:30-33

not a sin to eat the thing one has created. Kartik was in a dilemma. He put a condition that he would fulfill her desire and act according to her wish only when there would be total silence in the place. There should not be any kind of sound in the place. But Kartik was rescued from committing the sin at the right time by a pair of peacock. Kartik was relieved and Parvati was ashamed of herself. Out of anger and frustration she cursed the pair of peacock that they would never get the satisfaction of conjugal life.

The great importance of sons to mothers in the politics of the Indian family (Kakar 1978, 57), is related to prolonged period of breast-feeding, the practice in many families of sons sleeping next to mothers almost until they are adolescent does make the mother-marries-son tale significant. It expresses a mother's desire and real temptation to cling to her son.

A rare example of mother –son relations in mythology is the Bengali legend about goddess Durga, whose intercourse with her son is watched and noisily interrupted by a peacock. Durga gets angry with the peacock for being a peeping Tom and curses the bird with impotence and an ugly squeal for a voice. She relents later and allows peacocks to have offspring by means of their tears.

This tale reflects on the fact that mothers don't want to part away with the sons and because of the close nature of their relationship, mothers feel threatened by the arrival of another woman (daughter-in –law) in her son's life. The feeling of insecurity creeps in as she doesn't want to lose her son to another woman. Sometimes this desire to cling to her son increases to dangerous proportion as in the case of Parvati, who was physically attracted to her son and thus wanted to establish a sexual relationship with her son. As a result she becomes a transgressor here, crossing the role assigned to a mother, who tried to be passionately involved with her own son.

4.4.3 *Tasrairajur Kahini* (the story of *Tasrairaju*)¹⁹

Basundhar was born to sage Krimichung and his wife. But after some time the sage got bored of family life and left for doing serious

19. Rabha, 1977:15-22
Sarma, 2010:1-6
Patgiri, 2005:427-432

meditation and said that in case of any danger the family should remember him. Once Basundhar fell ill and his mother went in search of medicine in a dense forest. At the same time Tasrairaju also fell sick and her mother also searched for medicine in the same forest. In the process both the mothers met, talked and agreed for a marriage between their children. Suddenly Basundhar's mother got killed by a tiger while she went for fishing.

Basundhar was then given shelter by Kancharaju Tikkaraju and she brought him up. Tikkaraju was considered an evil woman. She knew black magic and sorcery. Because of this nobody married her.

Everyone knew that Basundhar and Tasrairaju would get married soon as planned by their respective mothers. Kancharaju Tikkaraju could not tolerate this. She got passionately attracted to Basundhar, although he was much younger than her. The date of their marriage was fixed. But the evil woman had different plan. Through magical power she took the guise of Tasrairaju and married Basundhar, replacing his chosen bride. Next day everyone came to know about the fact. Both Basundhar and Tasrairaju were very upset over the development. He got separated from his beloved. Now Basundhar tried to get rid of characterless Tikkaraju. Once he pretended to be ill. Tikkaraju tried medicine to get him cured. But he continued to feign illness. He asked her to go to a sage and take his advice. Accordingly she went there where Basundhar was already sitting in the guise of the sage. The sage said to her, "He has been suffering because your head swarms with lice and Basundhar's sword is rusted. Both of you will have to go to the same river and bathe there cleansing your head and Basundhar will sharpen his sword and said that Basundhar will recover only when the rust of his sword will be removed along with the lice's of your head". While following the sage's advice, taking advantage of the situation Basundhar killed Kancharaju Tikkaraju. But as she knew witchcraft, with the slain head itself, she tried to attack Basundhar. This time Basundhar's father came to his rescue and he finally got rid of her.

Now he went to Tasrairaju and wanted to marry her. But he had said that kancharaju Tikkaraju died out of illness, hiding the fact that he had killed her. They were happily married now. One day he told Tasrairaju the real story behind Kancharaju Tikkaraju's death. She got suspicious but remained silent. One day she reported the matter to her mother. Her mother became worried that Basundhar might repeat the

same act with her daughter also. She then reported the incident to her brother Maranga. Maranga was an angry person but he always followed truth and punished wrongdoers. He came to beat Basundhar but he managed to flee away. Maranga also knew magic and with the help of that power he confused Basundhar's way and finally got transformed him into a stork (*bor Tukala*). This happened because Basundhar ate *Faring* (cricket). Now both mother and daughter became very sad over the development and regretted what had happened.

Tasrairaju was young and beautiful. So, people got attracted towards her. In a moment of weakness she got united with Nalong, and became pregnant. Their union outside marriage was not accepted as their family backgrounds differ. Both of them became worried as society would consider it as a sin and they would not get society's sanction. Finding no other alternative, they decided to die and went for self immolation. But as the fire increased they could not resist the heat and ran out of it. To get relief Nalong jumped into a river and became fish and she went to a forest and became a bird. Thus the story ended in a sad note.

The hero is presented as an orphan (practically) with the sage father's rare presence as he left home after his son's birth, for a life of solitude and meditation and his mother's untimely death. It gave the other female character, Kancharaju Tikkaraju, a chance to take charge of the situation and mother the child. She nursed him and brought him up into manhood. As the boy attained maturity the woman who brought him up as a mother figure, felt attracted towards him. Passion of the woman became a key factor in the tale for which she wanted to marry the son figure much younger than her. Till then she remained a spinster as people avoided her because she practiced witchcraft. Her desire to marry much younger Basundhar is not sanctioned by society. The boy's marriage was fixed by his mother before her death. In due course of time he decided to get married to the girl of his mother's choice, whom he also loved dearly. But things did not turn out as he wanted. The evil woman resorted to magic and married him in the guise of his beloved. She substituted herself with the original bride of choice and got married to Basundhar by resorting to trick. Folklorists Stith Thompson and Warren Roberts have remarked on this tale type "stories dealing with the substituted bride theme are very common in India and show a great variety in

their treatment of the theme.” (Thompson and Roberts, *Types of Indic Oral Tales*, 1960, P.58).

Ramanujan in “Towards a Counter System: Women’s Tales” (Dharwadker, 1999) maintains that inversion or the reversal of a normal order or position or relation is found in folktales. According to him in folktales women have the courage to come out of subjugation of patriarchal social set up. In real life there is subjugation but in tales women have a better standing.

According to Propp (1958), the woman, (Kancharaju Tikkaraju) lacks something- she is unmarried, unwanted. There is partial lack liquidation through the child she brought up (Basundhar).

Here magic worked as an instrument of controlling situation in her favour. Magic played an important part, though negativity is attached to it but we also see that there is counter attack through magic later on in the story. Recurring motif is magic and establishment of social norms and punishment.

Again when Tasrairaju’s husband was turned into a stork, she remained neither a widow nor a married woman. But being young and beautiful, she naturally had the physical urge. But society would not permit that and there is social sanction on her. This reflects society’s idea on sexuality. This view is extended to the idea of proper relationship sanctioned by society. Society has a set rule as to how women should behave and express or repress her desire. She is not expected to give a free display of her sexual desires or urges. But in a weak moment, Tasrairaju and Nalang copulated clandestinely. In course of time she became pregnant. But Tasrairaju was the descendant of a sage and Nalang that of a hero. Their union, that too out of wedlock, was considered to be a sin in the eyes of society. They were seriously in trouble. On the one hand, they would have to bear the brunt of the society, and on the other, maintain the prestige of their respectable lineages. Unable to find a way to keep the balance, out of desperation, they decided to end their lives. There is considerable disagreement amongst psychoanalyst as to how this process of development of sexuality and sexual identity applies to girls. However the control of sexuality falls more heavily on females in most societies and their sexuality and reproductive nature

became a part of the family's social strategies. Repression of their sexual desire is more complicated, sometimes entailing an earlier and subsequently more severe denial.

Thus the tale also commented on the propriety of women's sexual relationship. While the evil woman took the upper hand in establishing relationship through marriage to fulfill her urge, and consequently got killed, the virtuous women decided to die on her own, fearing the consequence of her act of intimacy, which is not granted by society.

Ramanujan said that folklore is a counter system (Dharwadker, 1999). Folktales cannot always cross the prevailing discourse in the society, although we find inversion of the normal order time to time. Foster mother and son's marriage is against the prevailing social discourse. Thus the scheming mother was expectedly punished, that too by the son whom she nurtured and later on married.

In tales evil women or witches are seen as powerful, but their capability is aligned to monstrosity. Folktales witches often take the villain's role as was seen in this tale. Kancharaju Tikkaraju's character is also seen as villain, who became instrumental in separating two loving people to fulfill her own desire. As old, ugly women she was put in contrast with the young, beautiful heroine.

Folklorist Natalie Kononenko's study of witchcraft in Ukraine (Röhrich, 2008) shows that suspicion against witches sometimes led to verbal and physical attacks, and even to murder. This fact is also reflected in this particular tale where evil Kancharaju Tikkaraju was murdered by Basundhar who was initially brought up by her after he lost his biological mother. Thus negative conceptualization of female power nonetheless also abounds in folktales like this. Just as a woman can stand for the unity and productivity of the successful household so can she stand for the destructive tendencies inherent to the household. Women are associated with conflict, envy and witchcraft. Female characters whose attributes are grounded in the femininity schema lead happy lives if their behaviour revolves around beauty, passivity, and dependence on outside forces. This is so implicated in the narrative that it constitutes a cause and effect relationship and the drastic consequences of breaching this formula imply a misogynistic view of women. In

this tale society has a negative view of Kancharaju Tikkaraju as she was different from society's expectation of a woman. She practices magic, asserted herself, went on to marry the much younger man she desired, through her skill in magic. She does not fit into the femininity schema of passive and dependent woman. Thus she qualifies as evil, one who needs to be punished.

Both the women are transgressors here. By marrying the man she brought up in his parent's absence, and a man much younger to her, Kancharaju Tikkaraju transgressed the societal norm and thus was punished by the same man she once nurtured and brought him to manhood. She was a mother-figure and thus a transgressor. Again Tasrairaju also transgresses her role as a wife by establishing a relation with Nalong, which was considered a sin by society.

4.5 NEGATIVE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WOMEN

Negative conceptualization of female power abounds in folktales. Women are associated with conflict, envy and witchcraft. Many women who stand partially outside the conventional expectations for their role, appearance, status or activities label themselves or receive their community's label as witches.

4.5.1 *Shankha Ojhar Kahini* (tale of Shankha Ojha)²⁰

Once upon a time there lived an *Ojha* (exorcist, incantator). There was nothing that he could not cure. The moment he touches a person, he recovers from his ailment. Thus people respected Shankha Ojha a lot. His wife's name was Radaiyari. He married her who was a witch herself, through his power of incantation or occult power. Although she had some resentment she was not bad basically.

The witches of that area were not at all happy with him. One day they held a meeting to chalk out plan to deal with Shankha Ojha as due to him they are not getting anyone to torment. They feared that they won't get anyone to eat till *Ojha* lives. After a prolonged discussion they agreed that no outsider could harm him. Thus the responsibility of killing him was given to his two nieces. Raimari and Abulani-Bibulani. Listening these, both the sisters were very scared. Killing their own maternal uncle is a sin for which they would not be forgiven by anyone. But they did not have any other option. Unless they kill their maternal uncle, they will be killed by the witches.

20. Hakacham, 2009:108-114

Days passed by. They had neither courage nor opportunity to accomplish the job vested on them. They sometimes came to visit the uncle's place. On one such visit, they were searching lice on the head of their maternal aunt. In villages searching lice is a favorite pastime with women. Their uncle could very well understand the reason behind their frequent visit to his house and their talk with aunt Radaiyari. One day the niece asked, "Dear aunt, our maternal uncle is such a famous *Ojha*. He won't die easily. Nobody can get better of him. Is there any chance that he would die of something particular?" the aunt replied "neither witch nor snake could do any harm to him". They then replied "Oh, it means our uncle is immortal, do not mind, we just asked whether there is any means by which he would die. But now we are so happy to know that nobody can kill him".

The maternal aunt was very simple. Gullible as she was, she could not understand the cunning niece's real motive behind their inquiry. She said frankly that as far as his knowledge over incantation and herbal medicine was concerned he was simply unbeatable. But if a snake bites him on his neck then he would naturally die as incantation or his magical power fails in that case. These two girls were very happy to get the secret out of their aunt.

One day Shankha *Ojha* went out to jungle in search of rare herbal medicine. While searching for it, a snake from a hole of a tree had bitten him on the back of his neck. This snake was none other than his own niece. In sheer pain somehow he returned and asked his son to rush to the jungle to bring the medicine which could cure him. And to find it quickly and correctly he asked him to take a dead fish along with him so that he can test the medicine. He found the medicine but the niece who had bitten her uncle in the guise of a snake now transformed herself into an old lady and intercepted him on the way back. She said "throw away the medicine and rush to your house. It is of no use as your father has already died". The simple son threw it and ran towards the house. Everyone is waiting for him eagerly to bring the medicine. But he disappointed everyone. Again he was sent back to the forest with a word of caution not to listen to anyone this time. Once again he got the medicine but he met with an unknown woman. She told him that "leave the medicine. It is of no use. Your father died and his cremation was also over. I have attended his cremation and now coming back to take a bath. Rush to your home. You have many things to do."

This time also he failed in fulfilling the expectation of the people particularly his mother. The mother lost her patience and said “you have seen the condition of your father. Still you did not care to cure him. You are an unworthy son and you will be responsible for your father’s death.” Soon Sankha Ojha died.

Sankha Ojha died because his wife shared the secret of the manner of his death with others although unknowingly and because his son proved to be an absolute fool. Centre of the tale is Sankha Ojha who is powerful, revered and his presence is overwhelming in the story- a person capable of charms and incantation. By his occult power he posed threat to the witches as he is challenging their very survival.

The wife of Sankha Ojha was simple and gullible to the extent that she shared the life-secret of her husband with his niece. It is possible that she might not be aware of the fact that by revealing the secret of her husband she is risking his life. But we cannot overlook one important point mentioned in the story that is the *Ojha* had married his wife through charms and incantations. By revealing the secret of his life she might have contested the patriarchal male domination (i.e. by her husband), although she might not be aware of it herself. Again meaning is fluid and it is not always clear if the meaning of a particular text or performance is in fact subversive. Texts typically have inherent ambiguities, opening them to alternative interpretations and used by diverse audiences.

Witches in folktale often take the villain’s role. Witches are always situated in the margins in contrast to the *Ojha* who is at the centre. Mainstream (*Ojha*) has marginalized the margin (witches) in the tale who are struggling for their survival and future security. By hatching a plan to overcome *Ojha* they are trying to subvert the power centre (*Ojha*). Looked from this angle the wife is also at the margin who was married by the use of charms and incantations.

Within patriarchy there is no mid way for women. A woman can be either good or bad, either angel or monster as Gilbert and Guber mentioned in their book “The Madwoman in the Attic”. The angel they noted is an ideal representation of the feminine-with associated attributes like purity, submissiveness and self-denial. The monster conversely has traits typically

associated with masculine behaviours like aggressiveness (or assertiveness) selfishness (or independence) and the lust for fame and fortune (or ambition or work ethic). By challenging *Ojha's* existence, and trying to find ways and means to kill *Ojha*, and eventually becoming successful at killing him, they have secured their existence along with fame and fortune for themselves and their next generation. Living Sankha *Ojha* is a threat to their very survival. By sharing the secret, the wife also allied with the witches, though unknowingly, thereby qualifying as a monster.

Bell Hooks in center/margin theory maintained that for any defined group, especially one with any power, influence or control, there is a center and a margin where the center has more power, influence or control than the margin. Margin always tries to move to the center. The way to move towards the center is to use those with influence in the community. The witches who are at the margins tried to move towards the center by displacing the *Ojha* from the center. They established a connection with *Ojha's* nieces and successfully influenced them to kill their maternal uncle. Through the nieces of *Ojha* they tried and got the better of *Ojha* and moved towards the center from margin. The nieces of Sankha *Ojha* are presented as evil as they betrayed their uncle and killed him. For their own survival they obeyed the witches who used them to achieve their goal. The process of killing the *Ojha* was not an easy one. The nieces, first transformed themselves into a snake and then to an old woman and finally to an unknown woman. But if we observe the pattern all the disguises they took are of female to accomplish the evil deed. In this tale we see the negative portrayal of women in the form of the wife, nieces and the witches.

In the dominant patriarchal set up male visualizes women as submissive disallowing her right to any revolutionary activity. Thus the resistance by the witches with the active help from the nieces to Sankha *Ojha's* overwhelming presence and domination would not be accepted by the society. So the activities of the witches are always considered evil.

Witches by being assertive, active, aggressive, selfish can never qualify as ideal from the male point of view. In the folktales witches are situated right on

the borderline between the realm of the human and the realm of the demonic. Being a demonic individual the witch can change her appearance. She makes herself unrecognizable by taking on the looks of another woman, transforms herself into animal or into an object. By changing themselves into old and unknown women respectively, the nieces have proved to be powerful but this has also equated them with the witches because a demonic individual like witch can change form according to their need and wish.

4.5.2 *Lubhuni Burhi* (Greedy old woman)²¹

There was an old couple. They did not have any children. So they were unhappy. The old man was expert in work. Though he is old he still ploughs in the field. One day while working in the field, he saw a bird (*kora sarai*) chirping. The old man followed the bird silently and killed it. The old man was very happy at the prospect of having a good meal with the meat of the bird. He brought it home, asked his wife to cook it and left for a bath in the river. The old woman prepared the meat with pieces of pumpkin. But she was extremely greedy and could not even wait to finish cooking. Instead in the name of tasting the curry she started eating one piece of meat after another. This way she finished the entire meat. What was left for the old man was only curry and pieces of pumpkin. Disappointed at this he asked her-

Haye burhi

Ek kora anilong mari

Anjat dekhu suda pani

(old woman, what happened to the bird I brought along?)

The old woman replied-

Ae Burha , korak nanibe jani

Lau rol dukhara dukhari

Kora hae gel pani.

(The old woman said that the meat of the bird melted into water only the pumpkin remained in the curry)

Hearing her clever answer the anger of the old man dampened a bit. Another day during the first flood of the season in *kulsi* river people got busy in fishing. The old man succeeded in catching eight *kurhi* fishes and asked his wife to prepare fish *tenga with ou tenga* (a kind of citrus

21. Rabha, 2004:14-17
Bhubin Rabha, Loharghat

fruit used to prepare fish curry). Once again the same thing got repeated. She finished one fish after another while tasting the stuff. Getting nothing to eat, out of anger the old man asked-

Haye sakhini burhi

Ath kurhiya anilong mari

Anjat dekhu suda pani

(old woman, what happened to the eight fishes I caught?)

Clever woman replied-

Eh burha nakabide-

Burha-bule kinu hal?

Burhi- dui gel bil suwari

Burha- aru chay?

Burhi- basongte katongte duta gel khyay

Burha- aru sari?

Burhi- thakurar jhiyake nila duta karhi

Burha- aru dui?

Burhi- eta khala saru eta khala jui”

(out of the eight fishes two left for the lake itself, from remaining six two got lost/depleted while cleaning, two were snatched away by the village headman out of the four left, and out of the last two left, one is eaten by an innocent kid, and the other is burnt in fire)

The answer made him astonished but was really upset over the whole matter. He decided to teach his wife a lesson. One day he brought a big, ripe jackfruit to his home. From its smell itself the old woman's mouth went watery. Realizing her greed the old man answered- “*oi burhi, pasanti ghalanti tak nakhay tiranti*” meaning women should not eat rotten fruit. And instead he ate the entire jackfruit in front of her. The greedy woman could only watch with eagerness in her eyes.

If you cheat someone, get ready to be cheated also. The old woman was shown as an extremely greedy person. She transgresses her role as a wife, a woman. Traditionally a woman is expected to wait for her husband to eat first, and then only she eats. But here she did not keep anything for her husband to eat. Rather her greed was such that she could not even wait for the cooking to finish. While tasting it she finished everything. Thus her behaviour was quite unlikely of a woman.

4.5.3 *Masmariya Burha* (an old fisherman)²²

There was an old couple. They were issueless. The man never used to go out for fishing in the fields, ponds and lakes. Rather he used to work in his *Bari* (courtyard). The old woman used to go out for fishing generally. But once it so happened that by the grace of god she became *gabhari* (pregnant). At that time she could not go out for fishing. But she used to like fish very much. To fulfill his pregnant wife's desire, the old man went for fishing. Although, he was an *ediniya masuoi* (first timer), he could successfully catch 8 nos. of *Kurhi* fish. Reaching home he asked his wife to clean and prepare fishes. He took bath and went out to roam around the village.

After she finished cooking she could not wait for her husband to return, rather she ate all the fishes herself. When the old man returned and sat for lunch, he did not get a single fish to eat. Astonished at this he asked his wife "what happened to the fishes I asked you to cook?"

The wife replied-

Mari anilong ath kurhiya
Duta gel bil suwariya
Teutu thakibo lagisil chay?
Kutungte basongte duta gel khyay
Teutu thakibo lagisil sari?
Gaor gauburha ahi duta loi gel karhi
Teutu thakibo lagisil dui?
Eta khale nabalok saliye,
Eta khale jui, kot puwa burka toi.

(out of the eight fishes two left for the lake itself, from remaining six two got lost/depleted while cleaning, two were snatched away by the village headman out of the four left, and out of the last two left, one is eaten by an innocent kid, and the other is burnt in fire)

This way answering cleverly she saved herself from the anger of her husband and also successfully managed to convince him.

The story teller Bhubin Rabha, Loharghat, analyzed it as saying if you know how to speak, how to use words in your favour, you can survive in difficult and extremely hard situation. Set in a Rabha household this tale shows women in

22. Bhubin Rabha, Loharghat

their day to day life. They cook, do all the household chores and also go out for fishing. When the old woman ate all the fishes there was an indirect hint at her greed but the narrator's sympathy lies with her as he mentioned about the fact that the woman got pregnant by god's grace. During pregnancy a woman craves for different food. The husband went to fish for the first time as she wanted to eat fish and could not go out herself for that. Traditionally a woman is given importance and care during pregnancy and this fact is reflected in this tale. Her husband and family try to keep her happy fulfilling her wishes to the extent possible.

Two versions of the tale reflect on an important point- woman was seen in sympathetic light in one version (may be due to her pregnancy at late age) and in another version her greed is highlighted.

4.5.4 *Jilee kenekoi Hal* (How Cicada was created)²³

Once upon a time there lived a widow with her two daughters. They were very poor. One day the elder sister bagged some millet from someone else's field. While going for fishing, she asked her younger sister to prepare cake of rice (*pitha*) from the millet. The sister got busy in the act and prepared the cake of rice, though very few in numbers. The elder sister returned home to find a few cakes. This aroused her suspicion that the younger might have eaten some. She scolded her sister and asked her to say the truth. Finally out of suspicion, she cut her stomach in search of the rice cake, which was of course not to be found there. Thus the innocent younger sister died. The elder sister could realize her mistake. Out of pain and sorrow, she was turned into an insect and whenever there was sunshine, *Jilee* cries remembering her misdeed.

The story speaks of the suspicion of the elder sister towards her younger sister. Suspicion can prove to be fatal. As a negative quality it is associated with woman. Taking action in anger is dangerous. Some mistakes can't be corrected in life. Life once lost can't be brought back however much one repents. The story has thus a message to convey i.e. believing in your own family members is

23. Hakacham, 2009:73

important in sustaining a relationship. In the kinship context one sister took the life of the other sister as she did not believe in whatever the younger sister said.

4.6 WOMEN AS PRIZE OR GIFT

There are many examples of fathers who regard daughters as their property, whom they can give away in marriage. The kings/fathers reveal a patriarchal system of affairs by offering their daughter's hands in marriage to the man who kills a dragon or some monster, as a reward for finding solutions to problems, for victory in tournament or game, supplying a precious thing or simply by winning the heart of the father by some act or deed. Sometimes the daughter is given to some animal (frog/snake) to fulfill some promise. The awesome patriarchal hierarchy of marriage and family, in other words the supreme authority of the father is not only clearly visible in both fairy tales and folktales but also in the teaching on the marriage in the didactic tales.

4.6.1 *The King-Frog*²⁴

There was an issueless old couple. Although old, the man still ploughed. In his own cultivated land he set big *Khokas* (bamboo-made fish trapping receptacle), and got sufficient fishes too. But for the last few days he failed to catch any fish. One day in his *Khokas* he found a big "*ganggang*" frog. The old man was angry at seeing the frog. He brought home the frog and told his wife "look, this frog devours all the fishes that are entrapped in my *khoka*. Cook this frog. Today we shall eat its meat. After killing it, fry its flesh in oil. I shall take revenge on it this way". Following her husband's direction the old lady came forward to kill the frog. The frog urged the woman "oh grandmother, I fervently beseech you not to kill me. I will earn my livelihood and sustain you like a son". The old woman relented after listening to his repeated requests. She did not kill it, instead killed a chicken and fried it in high heat.

When the old man came home and sat for lunch, he proclaimed in pride, "oh, *ganggang*, by devouring you I have taken revenge on you. Oh! How much of our fish had you finished?" listening to this the frog kept in the *khaloi* (a bamboo made container to keep uncooked fish) began to giggle. Taken aback the old man asked "who is giggling there?"

24. Rabha, 1977:28-36
Sarma, 2010:11-17

The wife said “no, no one has giggled”. The husband persisted saying that somebody has giggled. The wife stuck to her point and said “no, no, there is no one to laugh. It is perhaps your deed, you simpleton”. The old man resumed having meal but the frog continued to giggle. The old man stood up and tried to find out who had ridiculed him. The wife now got scared. She held him by the hand and told him in detail the story about the frog. Still when the frog persistently began to beseech, “oh grandpa, please don’t kill me. I swear by God. I will look after you like a son”. When both the frog and the old woman requested him again and again the old man gave in. He asked the frog what work he will do for him, as he is not a human being. The frog replied “oh, grand pa, although I am not a man, I shall be able to do all kinds of work just like a man does”.

As promised the frog went for ploughing. The old man on the other hand remained busy making ridges and uprooting weeds in the field. As soon as ploughing was finished, the frog returned with a pair of bull.

Once during rainy season came heavy flood. The surging water inundated the *Bao* (a kind of paddy grown on flooded land) paddy fields. The frog ploughed the field on the high lands. At that time the king along with his sentries was rowing through the paddy field. The frog perching on the handle of the plough began to banter with the king’s band. He asked: ‘who are these rascals that go rowing through the paddy crop? They have, as though taken to excrement’. The king and his sentries looked all around but found none. They could only see a pair of oxen bound with a plough and a yoke. Having seen no one, the king loaded his boat with the pair of oxen and the yoke and rowed homewards. The frog felt extremely distressed. But he promised the old couple that he would bring back the pair of oxen and the yoke by hook or crook. He was determined to do so.

As he set out for his mission, he met the king of bees and snakes and narrated his story of distress. Hearing this they promised him all assistance. Accordingly they planned that snakes will keep hiding around the precincts of the palace and the bee brothers will keep hanging in the trees of the vicinity. The frog will have to go directly to the king and demand from him the return of the pair of bullocks and the yoke. If he does not agree the frog would proclaim war immediately. Then they will attack the King’s sentries.

When the frog raised his demand the king dismissed him as insignificant frog. When he waged war, the king still did not give him much importance. Instead he laughed at him. But in the war the King was defeated. Helped by the bees and snakes the frog became irresistible. Being elated at the situation, the frog shot a volley of questions to the king, "oh king, where is your valour? Where is your strength? Tell me are you ready to make a truce; whether you will return me my bullocks, plough and yoke? Utterly perplexed and helpless the king agreed to make a truce. The frog then agreed to a ceasefire. But as a condition for the truce the frog wanted to marry the king's daughter. Before revealing his condition he made the king take an oath that he would abide by the condition.

The king swooned on hearing the frog's proposal but recovered after being nursed. There was no backing out. There was loud wailing. The princess too fainted. When she recovered her marriage was accomplished with pomp and ceremony and she was sent to her in laws place with royal gifts and farewell.

The old couple unaware of what has happened was sitting worried for their grand son, the frog. They were astounded when the big procession entered their courtyard. As ordered by the frog the princess prostrated before the old couple to offer her regards.

On the night of consummation the frog was transformed into a young man. And he revealed that he was actually a widow's son and became a frog because a *tantric* mendicant sprinkled water from his water pot on him out of rage as he was a restless young boy at that time that irritated the mendicant. As a remedy he said "you will live the life of a frog. In flourishing youth, when you copulate with a young woman, you will be transformed into a man." Thus on that night he became a man. After that he searched for his mother and found her too. Every one including the parents of the princess, the old couple became happy at the turn of event. The king vested the new couple with the mantle of supreme power of the entire kingdom. He was coroneted and was called the Frog-king.

We see here an old childless couple. The old woman was so affectionate by heart that when the frog requested her not to kill (for cooking) him she just could not proceed. Her motherly instinct aroused and she tried to protect him from her husband who wanted to take revenge on him by killing her. Finally both

the old lady and the frog requested him to have mercy on him. The frog promised him that he would look after and sustain them as their son. Thus the frog won them around as a son, promising love and care for them. The old couple was childless and thus might have experienced the sorrows of childlessness and must have longing for the child. In India a childless couple is considered terribly unfortunate. So when the frog offered to be their son in lieu of sparing his life, they were happy that they have got support in their old age. It is every couple's dream that they have a child. Though late in their life they could realize their dream through the frog.

As the story developed, the king lost the war with the frog and agreed to give his daughter to the frog in marriage as a condition of the truce. The king gave his daughter in marriage to a frog to save his life and kingdom. The woman is here treated as a commodity to be bartered in exchange of his happiness and safety.

We can here refer to Luce Irigaray, a prominent author in contemporary French feminism and continental philosophy who in her work named "Cosi Fan Tutti" (in *This Sex which is Not One*), argues that phallus is not a symbolic category, but is ultimately an extension of a reinforcement of Freud's description of the world according to a one sex-model (men exist and women are a variation of men). She also maintained that the phallus as the master signifier (that can be traced back to male anatomy) is evidence that the symbolic order is constructed and not ahistorical. The phallus is the privileged master signifier of the symbolic order. One must have a relationship to the phallus if one is to attain social existence.

Irigaray alleges that women have been traditionally associated with matter and nature to the expense of a female subject position. While women can become subjects if they assimilate to male subjectivity, a separate subject position for women does not exist. The rest of the world which is defined as 'other' has meaning only in relation to the possessor of the phallus. Thus Irigaray believes that men are subjects and women are "the other" of these subjects (non-subjective, supporting matter).

Thus as a possessor of the phallus, a frog (a male) like a man can wish or desire a woman as his bride. With the phallus men can inscribe on women's body. She is treated as a commodity by her father, the king because as a king, his duty is to protect his kingdom from the enemy. As a condition in the truce with the frog, the princess was treated as a commodity, as an object rather than an individual.

Irigaray believes that all women have historically been associated with the role of "mother", whether or not a woman is a mother in reality; her identity is always defined according to that role. This is in contrast to men who are associated with culture and subjectivity. While excluded from subjectivity, women served as their unacknowledged support. In other words while women are not considered full subjects, society itself could not function without their contribution. She states that western culture itself is founded upon a primary sacrifice of the mother, and all women through her. In this tale the future of the king and his kingdom lied on the sacrifice made by the daughter. She was treated as a commodity in barter. But however unacknowledged her contribution remains, without her support the king (father) would have lost his kingdom.

There are certain symbolic and ritualistic ways in which the Ego deals with the demands of the Id. This sort of personal symbolism is the product of a process whereby an item becomes a substitute reality to satisfy the necessarily repressed demands and desires of the unconscious. One common form of this personal symbolic process is called symbolic object for the real object of the Id's desires. Another is symbolic transference: the substitution of another person for the real person the Id desires. Thus the girl was made happy as her wish is fulfilled at the end. Although she was silent at the decision of marriage to a frog and could only cry passively, there was latent desire in her. At the end her desire was fulfilled as the frog turns out to be a handsome hero. Thus the story is a kind of wish fulfillment for the girl, and projection of women's psychological longing for a better life.

Again if we follow the dominant patriarchal model that is prevalent in our society, we see that the princess was honoured for being obedient, submissive

and virtuous in the expected line. She was made happy as she followed her father's whims silently. Through this kind of tale male hegemony is perpetuated and sustained. From childhood a girl is made to believe that father's word is the last word and whatever he decides for her is final and she needs to accept these without any complain.

Folktale generally imparts a moral lesson. Sometimes it is overt in the narration and sometimes it is done indirectly. This kind of tale also gives a certain kind of inspiration to its followers particularly young girls. There is a message that if you follow the dictates of the father (a male figure) you will be rewarded at the end.

Again the story also reflects tradition and custom of the society. After marriage the frog gets the status of the husband and as a traditional wife the princess prostrated before the old couple along with her husband frog as asked by him. Status of the husband is important irrespective of who he is. One way this shows the superior position of the husband and on the other hand it also reflects on the tradition bound society. Bowing down to the old couple to seek their blessing by the newly wedded couple is a custom in our society. This also shows the mark of honour given to elders and close family members in different auspicious moments of family life, like, birth, marriage etc. This is acceptance of their seniority as well as acceptance of the new bride/groom by the elders. By giving blessings the old order passes the responsibility and therefore the power to the new bride.

reserved youth and soon began to show complete indifference to the world and its ordinary conventions. His mind was inquisitive and analytical. He ardently reasoned out everything that came within his ken.

With age Mithdeibesa became even more reserved, solitary and contemplative. His parents were quite alarmed at his unusual behaviour. So when he reached the age of 27, they got him married to a beautiful and accomplished girl of the Marak sect. It was their secret hope that the stern realities of married life would change him into a practical man of the world. Mithdeibesa was never lacking in conjugal happiness; but his attention was constantly fixed on the mysteries of birth and death, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. Occasional reprimands from his wife had little effect in making him give up his pensive mood.

With the passing years thoughtful Mithdeibesa became more solitary and silent than ever. Often in the midst of his profound meditations he lost sight of himself, his wife and children. He loved his children dearly; but the humdrum of home life with all its ties galled him. There was no solace in worldly life which to him was stale and unprofitable. Homely engagement proved a great impediment to his life-long desire of devoting himself to spiritual things. Therefore he decided to leave his wife and children. But before leaving he labored hard to accumulate enough food, cloth and other supplies to last for his wife and children for a long time to come.

Once in his ascetic life, in the purple dimness of the tropical night, he seemed to see a shadowy, ghost-like figure coming towards him. It was a colossal figure of a hairy, wild looking man. The colossal man was the materialized figure of a benign spirit known as *Jinnee*. The spirit was one of the immortals. It could make itself visible or invisible to human beings at will. It never willingly harmed any human being, but bore kindly thoughts towards mankind as a whole. *Jinnee* provided Mithdeibesa food and told him,

“I come to help thee. Not only can I bring the messages and things from the remotest places in no time but I can at once transport thee invisible wherever thou desire to go. I can make thee visible to thy fellow at thy sweet will.”

Mithdeibesa then desired to see his relations, family and friends once more but himself remaining invisible. Immediately the spirit bodily

transported him to his former home. He found his wife remarried to another man and muttered:

“It is her carnal desire that urged to seek that husband or the combined creative urge of man and woman that brought them together. It’s natural”. Next, he saw that his children were all well and happy, thus preferred to leave them undisturbed.

One day three men from Mithdeibesa’s village happened to meet him in the forest. Although an anchorite Mithdeibesa was not a misanthropist (general dislike of people). With the help of Jinnee he arranged for their food and shelter.

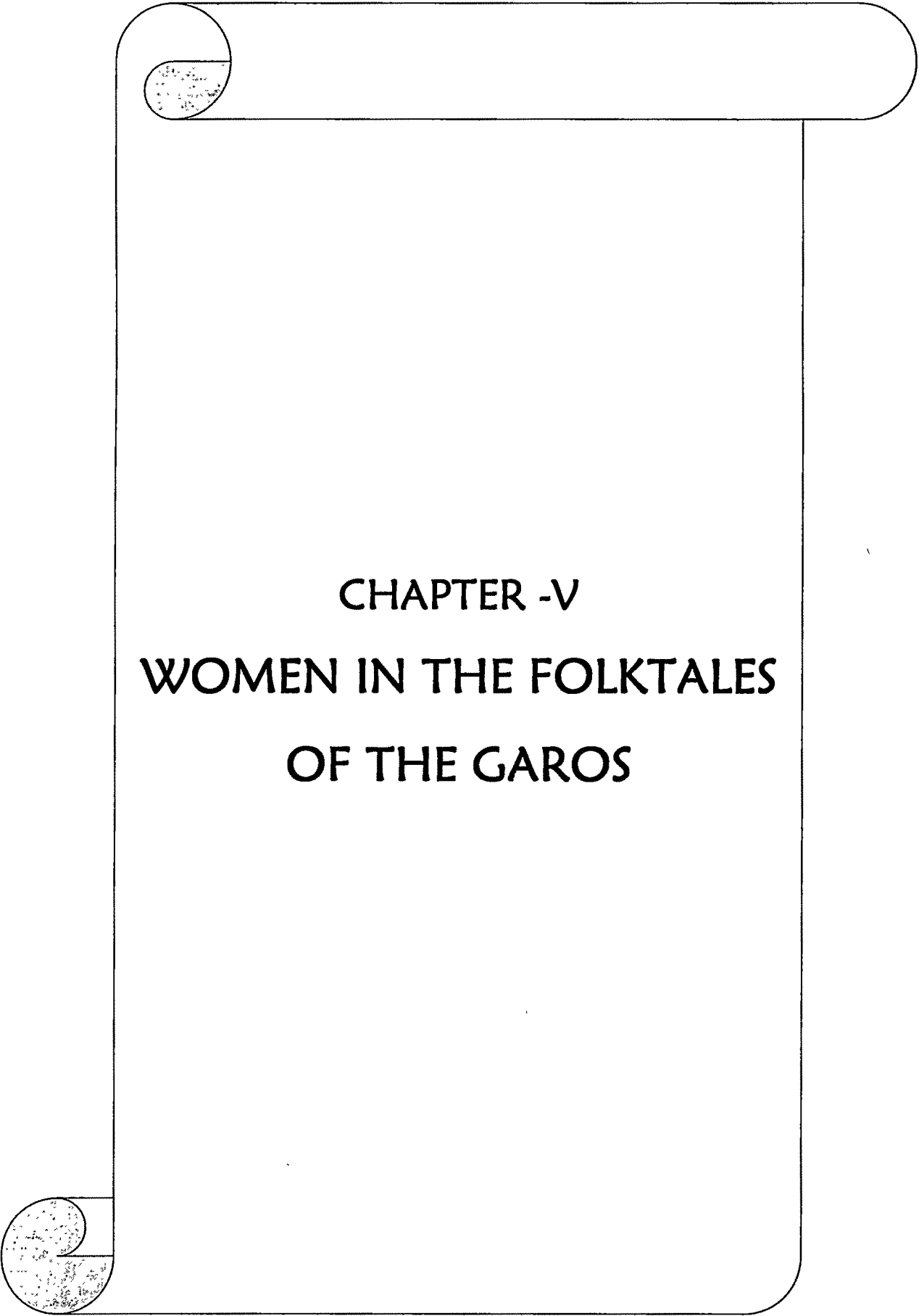
Once while discussing on ultimate realities, Mithdeibesa felt a great change taking place within himself. He realized that his body was but a particle of dust in the self acting whole. He asked *Jinnee*: “are there any other people who have forsaken home, wife and children in search of Truth as I have done?” And when Mithdeibesa wanted to know where they dwell and what do they do? And expressed desire to go there, *jinnee* immediately took him to the wonderful solitary caves in the great *Chuma* Mountains.

During my field visit in the Pilingkata area of Kamrup (Metro), Holdesh N.Sangma while talking on the story told that the Garos believe in spirit like Jinnee with special power. He also said that Mithdeibesa could accept his wife’s second marriage after he left her as natural because he did not have any interest in family life or material life. No doubt for a little while he thought over it and murmured within himself that it might have happened as the result of her carnal desire or liking between both man and woman. But he admitted it as natural. This fact did not bother him much as he was more interested in understanding the mysteries of the world. He himself preferred a secluded life. Since family life was creating an impediment to his Quest of truth and greater realities of life, he accepted her marriage liberally. In a way he was relieved to see her as well as her children happily settled. Sangma also said in this connection that Garo society is quite liberal in accepting second marriage and widow marriage in the absence of the husband/wife. Here women enjoy comparatively better freedom regarding her life. Mithdeibesa did not criticize his wife’s act of marrying as immoral. This is in one way a reflection on his broader mind and also can be understood as a

and virtuous in the expected line. She was made happy as she followed her father's whims silently. Through this kind of tale male hegemony is perpetuated and sustained. From childhood a girl is made to believe that father's word is the last word and whatever he decides for her is final and she needs to accept these without any complain.

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CHAPTER -V
WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES
OF THE GAROS

CHAPTER V

WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALES OF THE GAROS

When we make an assessment of the social progress we can not ignore the role played by women in any society. It would be rather impossible to discuss the past, the present and the future of humanity without taking into consideration the position of women in a given society. But the contribution of women towards society remains to a great extent unrecognized. From ages and ages women suffer inequalities under different pretext. But the root of it all starts with patriarchy and the internalization of these patriarchal norms by women themselves. The traditional role assigned to women in Indian society has restricted their mobility to a great extent. In Hindu tradition, though women have been considered to be the prime source of strength as reflected in the mythology and oral history in the society, in practice lot of prejudices stands in the way of treating them as equal to men. Now the question is whether the situation is any different in the tribal settings where matrilineal set up prevails? With their household economic system, practice of shifting cultivation, the land holding pattern and egalitarian ethos, the society does not suffer any prejudice against women. Particularly the matrilineal system protects, to a large extent the position of women in society. But scholars like Caroline Marak maintains that there is subjugation of women. Actual power rests with the males and the *mahari*. Although women inherit the parental property, actual control over it remains with the husband (NOKNA) or the maternal uncle or the *mahari*. Although we do not encounter instances of dowry deaths or female infanticide among the tribal population in our states which was rampant in the other states of India, here we see women enjoy relative autonomy as far as her movement is concerned. Womenfolk here are independent economically particularly matrilineal tribes like the Garos. But we can not overlook the fact that the discrimination of different nature is encountered here. Women are neither allowed to head administrative position of her village or neither town nor she is allowed to take lead in ritualistic ceremonies. It is said

that prejudices of many types are prevalent among Garo people as well. Let us now discuss some of the Garo tales and try to find out how women are represented in the tales and thereby to have an understanding of the role and status of Garo women.

5.1 WOMEN BEYOND HER GENDER ROLES

The stereotype notion of women in the service of men is questioned or defied by women in tales. Although women can hardly become successful in challenging male domination and are forced to observe values and norms of patriarchal society but in tales we find some women trying to break the chain and reduce the gender imbalance. Here women try to exercise freedom of choice, whereby they present a mind of their own.

5.1.1 *Mithdeibesa and Jinnee*¹

In older days there was a big village. Once there born a child who became an extra-ordinary member of the Shangma matri-phratry. His parents were a conscientious couple, comparatively well off, and always managing to keep in easy circumstances. He was the 7th child in the family but all the six born before him died in their infancy. Later another boy and a girl were born. The parents loved the trio dearly. When the girl came of age, she was married to a splendid young man of the Marak matri-phratry of the tribe. She continued to be the heir of the house in conformity with the matrilineal usage of the tribe.

From his early boy hood this 7th child was very fond of sacrificial ceremonies and ritual performances. He would often listen with profound interest to the devotional chants and prayers, the wild and mystic strains and invocations of the *Achik* priests to the Unseen Deity, known as Mithdei. Because of his outstanding interest in religious matters his parents called him Mithdeibesa, which means “the Friend of the Deity”.

Mithdeibesa was not subject to fierce passions. He eschewed the excesses of youth and turned to contemplation for comfort. He became immersed in the world of thought and spirituality. He was a silent and

1. Rongmathu, 1960 : 54-60
Barkataki, 1970:218-22
Holdesh N.Sangma

reserved youth and soon began to show complete indifference to the world and its ordinary conventions. His mind was inquisitive and analytical. He ardently reasoned out everything that came within his ken.

With age Mithdeibesa became even more reserved, solitary and contemplative. His parents were quite alarmed at his unusual behaviour. So when he reached the age of 27, they got him married to a beautiful and accomplished girl of the Marak sect. It was their secret hope that the stern realities of married life would change him into a practical man of the world. Mithdeibesa was never lacking in conjugal happiness: but his attention was constantly fixed on the mysteries of birth and death, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. Occasional reprimands from his wife had little effect in making him give up his pensive mood.

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Once in his ascetic life, in the purple dimness of the tropical night, he seemed to see a shadowy, ghost-like figure coming towards him. It was a colossal figure of a hairy, wild looking man. The colossal man was the materialized figure of a benign spirit known as *Jinnee*. The spirit was one of the immortals. It could make itself visible or invisible to human beings at will. It never willingly harmed any human being, but bore kindly thoughts towards mankind as a whole. *Jinnee* provided Mithdeibesa food and told him,

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transported him to his former home. He found his wife remarried to another man and muttered:

“It is her carnal desire that urged to seek that husband or the combined creative urge of man and woman that brought them together. It’s natural”. Next, he saw that his children were all well and happy, thus preferred to leave them undisturbed.

One day three men from Mithdeibesa’s village happened to meet him in the forest. Although an anchorite Mithdeibesa was not a misanthropist (general dislike of people). With the help of Jinnee he arranged for their food and shelter.

Once while discussing on ultimate realities, Mithdeibesa felt a great change taking place within himself. He realized that his body was but a particle of dust in the self acting whole. He asked *Jinnee*: “are there any other people who have forsaken home, wife and children in search of Truth as I have done?” And when Mithdeibesa wanted to know where they dwell and what do they do? And expressed desire to go there, *jinnee* immediately took him to the wonderful solitary caves in the great *Chuma* Mountains.

During my field visit in the Pilingkata area of Kamrup (Metro), Holdesh N.Sangma while talking on the story told that the Garos believe in spirit like Jinnee with special power. He also said that Mithdeibesa could accept his wife’s second marriage after he left her as natural because he did not have any interest in family life or material life. No doubt for a little while he thought over it and murmured within himself that it might have happened as the result of her carnal desire or liking between both man and woman. But he admitted it as natural. This fact did not bother him much as he was more interested in understanding the mysteries of the world. He himself preferred a secluded life. Since family life was creating an impediment to his Quest of truth and greater realities of life, he accepted her marriage liberally. In a way he was relieved to see her as well as her children happily settled. Sangma also said in this connection that Garo society is quite liberal in accepting second marriage and widow marriage in the absence of the husband/wife. Here women enjoy comparatively better freedom regarding her life. Mithdeibesa did not criticize his wife’s act of marrying as immoral. This is in one way a reflection on his broader mind and also can be understood as a

reflection of a comparatively better status enjoyed by Garo woman under matrilineal set up.

Marriage is believed to be a corrective measure in society. Bringing a woman in a man's life is traditionally believed to bring responsibility and order in him. Thus Mithdeibesa was married to an accomplished girl. But the wife used to rebuke him getting dissatisfied at his ways i.e. unworldly behaviour.

5.1.2 *Kari (salt)*²

There was a Garo (*Achik*) family. They were very rich. They had two daughters. One day the father wanted to know how much his daughters loved him. So he asked his daughters about their love for him. The elder one said she loves him like sugar. But the younger daughter said that she loves him as salt. The father got offended by her comparison. Immediately the *mahari* decided to throw her out of her house as they found her answer not at all acceptable. Unhappy at her state she moved towards a forest alone and helpless. In the forest while she was crying helplessly, a king was passing by with his attendants. He noticed this beautiful but lonely girl. When the king asked her the reason of her sadness, she narrated her story. Hearing her sad plight, the king took her along with him to his palace. He decided to marry her. After their marriage a big feast was organized in honour of the new Queen. Everyone was invited including the family and relatives of the new Queen.

Everyone from her family came. The Queen strictly instructed the Kitchen staff that her relatives should be given food items without salt. They were treated with every possible kind of sweet items. Now it is not possible to eat only sweet items. This irked her family so much that they called their daughter who is now the Queen and complained about this. She humbly said that it was according to their wish that she did not give them anything salty. Hearing her words everyone realized their mistake and asked for her forgiveness.

Similar tale like this is discussed by Kirin Narayan in *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon* (pp189-192). Urmilaji, the story teller told a similar kind of story to Narayan while her visit to Kangra. Narayan opined that that the father's question, testing his daughter's love, hints at an over involved,

2. Holdesh N.Sangma

possessive relationship. Urmilaji, however, underplayed the King's possibly incestuous possessiveness. Rather it was the public opinion that turned against the princess in the Kangra tale for frankly describing her emotion. Holdesh N. Sangma also, while narrating the tale downplayed the over involvement of the father or his possessive feeling for the daughter. He said that since he did not like her answer or her answer went against his expectation it was their *mahari* which decided to throw her out of the house. But since the girl was honest and innocent she could prove her point to be right at the end of the tale. The girl's intention was never to hurt her father's emotion. She simply voiced her opinion frankly. And the family also realized their mistake and all of them got united at the end. Like Urmilaji he also stressed the fact that too much of sweet is not acceptable and gives rise to distaste. Salt is equally important and is required. Thus the girl has won the battle proving her answer to be right by deed. Its not always sugar that is sweet sometimes salt is even sweeter. She was rewarded as she was not at all wrong. "A person can't eat too much sugar, even though it's a very lovable thing". She faced trouble as she failed to live up to her father's expectation as she answered the way she felt it right rather than pleasing her father with her answer.

5.1.3 *The Two Doves and the Two Brothers*³

Among the *Achiks* (Garos), there lived in the olden days a very wealthy man at a village. This man dwelt there with his wife, mother – in-law and four daughters. The first two girls were both beautiful and accomplished. The younger ones were infants.

The man's mother in law was a cruel old woman who had little love for her grand daughters. She hated Awil and Singwil especially for their beauty for she herself was as ugly as any old hag could be. So she used to get the two girls into trouble whenever she could. Once she secretly mixed husk and charcoal with the rice which Awil and Singwil husked. She would put hair or rat dung into the rice which they had cooked and throw sand into the water which they had drawn for drinking. In this way she managed to get her grand daughters punished by their mother on many occasions.

3. Rongmathu, 1960:71-78
Barkataki, 1970:230-236

One day the mother asked them to take down some paddy from the granary and to thresh it with feet, dry it in the sun and pound it. Along with it she also asked them to fetch water from the river and cook rice for the entire family's meal before leaving for *jhum* field. Awil and Singwil did accordingly and took their younger sisters for a bath in the river. Before going they asked their grandmother to look after the paddy while they were gone. When they were away in the river the cruel old woman concealed the paddy which was spread out in the court yard to dry and when they returned told them that the paddy was eaten up by the pig and the capon. When their mother returned the cruel grand mother spoke up and said that the negligent girls had allowed a pig and a capon to eat up the paddy and that the two mischievous sisters took down more paddies from the granary in order to deceive their mother. The mother, instigated by the grand mother, beat the girls so unmercifully that they both fainted.

Again on another day in the absence of the father the old woman falsely accused Awil and Singwil of further wrong doing. Again their mother beat them very severely and locked them up. But they managed to free themselves with the help of a boy. Singwil went to the fowl house to collect feathers and Awil killed her father's pet capon and cooked it while carefully preserving the feathers. After finishing their meal Awil said to Singwil: "why should we continue to remain here where we receive nothing but beatings and abuses. Let us stick these feathers to our bodies with wax, turn ourselves into doves and fly away from this wretched place". Singwil agreed and turned themselves into doves and fly away from this wretched place." Singwil agreed and turned themselves into doves to save themselves from the torture and misery.

As doves they used to sing their stories to their mother and father. The father heard their voices and was much troubled in mind. He hurried home and found his wife and two younger daughters weeping for the missing elder sisters. He too began to weep. The mother admitted her fault and agreed to amend her ways. She requested the daughters to leave dove-shapes and become human being once more. She told them that they were frequently beaten on account of their grand mother's wickedness. That had ended as she was found out and promised that they won't be beaten any more.

But the doves would not return. Instead they said, "If you really love us, hang up two necklaces on a bamboo pole". The parents did so immediately and the two doves picked the ornaments and fled away.

A few days later the two doves fell in the trap laid down by the two brothers named Anal and Gunal. Awil was caught in the trap of the elder brother Anal and Singwil was caught in the trap of Gunal. Anal killed his dove, cooked it and ate it up. But Gunal took his dove and put it in a cage and took good care of it. One day when both the brothers left the house for their *jhum* field, the dove flew out of the cage and turned herself into a beautiful girl. She cleaned the house, swept the floor, drew water, cooked rice, and then returned to her former shape. Both the brothers after returning home from the day's hard work were surprised to find the house in good order and their evening meal all cooked and waiting for them. The same thing kept on repeating everyday, compelling them to find out the reason. Anal tried to find out the reason but could not keep himself awake so failed in his mission. But Gunal solved the mystery successfully and discovered the girl. When one day she was performing her regular activities, Gunal swiftly leaped out of his hiding place, seizes her up by the wrist and soon both of them married.

Singwil was exquisitely beautiful. So Anal grew very jealous of his brother who married her and wanted to kill him so that he could marry the girl himself. Thus one day he asked Gunal to catch crabs and *nahchi* fish. As Gunal entered the hole, Anal leaped up, burying big stones into the opening and covered his brother with them. Returning home he informed Singwil that "I tried to bring Gunal back; but he said that he wished to go away. He asked me to tell you not to worry about him; but that you may take another husband if you wish". But at that moment Irija Ganggaja, Gunal's faithful dog who had witnessed the murderous act, came wailing to Singwil and reported to her what happened. Both of them went out to search for Gunal and rescued and brought him back to life. Again one day, Anal asked him to climb up a *simul* (a large jungle tree) tree and bring a bird's nest. When he was on top, Anal prayed to Tattara Rabuga (owner of breath, father of life) to end his life and his breath be cut off by raising the tree to the skies. The tree suddenly sprang up and Anal hoped that Gunal would fall from the tree and be killed. Again the dog informed Singwil and she rushed to the spot. But the distraught wife could not find way of bringing her husband down. For full seven days and seven nights she stayed at the spot

sobbing bitterly at Gunal's plight and her own helplessness. She prayed everyone for help but finally Rema genggga Toajeng Abiljong, the patriarchal head of the golden backed woodpeckers, soared into the skies and brought Gunal down on its beak. Singwil took her husband home and nursed him back to health.

Again Anal pushed him into the roaring fire, heaped logs of dried wood on him and went home. Gunal's dog rushed back to his mistress and told her of the fate of the husband. Singwil took an iron rod, a mat and a fan as before, went to the fire, pulled her husband out of the flames and again besought Tattara Rabuga to restore him to life. Her prayer was heard a second time and Gunal was brought back to life once more.

Now Gunal lost all his patience and decided that he needs to put an end to his brother's mischief-making or else he might kill him some day. So for his own safety, he killed Anal and after that Gunal and Singwil lived happily ever after.

In this Garo folktale we find women are very active in the plot of the story. The father who stays in the mother-in-laws house according to Garo tradition, does not have much to say or do except working with the wife in the *Jhum* field or going out to the market. The grand mother in the tale had little love for her grand daughters. She was cruel and hated these two girls because of their beauty as she herself was ugly to look at. So to take revenge on them she used to get these girls to difficult situations. Jealousy is typically associated with women and in folktales we see jealousy of women to women- jealousy between co wives, stepsisters, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, sister and sister-in-laws for different reasons. Here we see grand mother being jealous of the grand daughters and the reason behind jealousy is their beauty. Grand mother as the matriarch of the Garo family, the most influential person in the family system, used all her power and capacity to influence her daughter against the grand daughters. She is an active agent, an instigator, who takes the plot forward. Women are prominently present in this tale. Garos being matrilocal and matrilineal the woman inherits the parental property and her place is not dislocated. She lives in her familiar atmosphere. It is the husband who moves to the wife's house after marriage, not the woman as it happens in the patriarchal system. As a result she

is psychologically secured, living in a congenial and intimate atmosphere among her own people. Thus women enjoy better power and authority by virtue of inheriting property and thus they are active. In this tale also it was the mother who beats the daughters as instigated by the grand mother, not the father. Here we see that the father had a secondary existence. We see women in different roles- as instigator (grand mother), taking action (mother punishing daughters), taking decision (changing to doves in order to protest against undue torture) as life saver (Singwil).

The two girls had the courage to take a decision-not to bear the torture anymore. To fulfill their decision they turned themselves into two doves, beyond the reach of their family members. This is their protest which can be seen as resistance. When the mother realized their mistake it was already too late. They refused to come back. Before leaving they demanded necklaces for them and took it away. This fact shows women's attachment to jewellery from time immemorial.

Next we see that the dove, when alone turned into a beautiful girl and performed all the household activities- cleaning, sweeping, drawing water, cooking food, etc. These household duties are so ingrained in woman that she need not be told to do that. Rather she performs it willingly and as her regular duty. After that Singwil and Gunal got married. But this co existence and shifting from bird to human is accepted as natural in folktales without raising any eyebrows. Max Lüthi observed in *The European Folktale* that folktale hero does not hesitate to marry an otherworld bride, whether a fairy, an animal, a swan maiden, or a witch's daughter. Sometimes these brides possess magical/special power. In this tale also when the two brothers found their home in order, got their meal ready, initially they thought it as the work of some ghost or spirit. But when they found that it was actually a beautiful girl who was a dove caught by the brothers, Gunal did not hesitate to marry her. In folktales characters can easily turn themselves from one thing to another. This shifting and changing is taken as natural.

Kirin Narayan mentioned that the metaphor of girl as bird is well established in Kangra and elsewhere in North India where village exogamy is practiced (Kirin Narayan "Birds on a Branch: Girl Friends and Wedding Songs in Kangra, 1986:47-75). In this tale also the girls turned into doves, unable to bear the torture of their mother and grand mother. As doves they used to sing their stories in front of their parents and parents thus became aware of the reality.

After her marriage with Gunal struggle of another kind started for Singwil. Rift between the two brothers started. Anal became envious of his brother as he married beautiful Singwil. Now he tried every possible trick up his sleeve to kill his brother to get Singwil. But every time she stood as a shield to her husband and came across as a strong character who did not give up under adversity. Rather she fought back and brought him back to life thrice. These incidents showed her love, loyalty and the power of chastity of women. The stereotyping of women has largely revolved around this notion of chastity. From her innate chastity comes the sacred power of the woman, whether she is an unmarried girl or married girl. The power of chastity was to be feared and revered because it could be both boon-giving as well as extremely destructive if threatened. Chastity as power is a recurrent theme that runs through all folkloric texts. Woman as a life giver is what we see in this tale. Thus the conception that women enjoy a better status is reflected here. As a girl Singwil was shown as taking decision along with her sister and then fighting actively for the life of her husband and succeeding in that.

Considering sex roles in Garo households, women not only work in the *jhum* fields but also do all the household duties. In this tale the mother goes for *jhum* field and the elder daughters help her in managing household chores.

Female characters have greater competence when women have stronger position in a number of societies with different kinship systems and historical antecedents. Fisher (1956) observed a positive correlation between the competence of female characters and women's status for two matrilineal societies (Truk and Popape) where position of women varies according to the strength of sister-sister relationship. High competence of women in folktales means that they

take the initiative, they play a strong role in decision making, they affect the outcome of action etc. Garos being matrilineal, the women in this Garo tale were found to be active.

5.1.4 Saora Spora and the Mermaid Queen⁴

Saora Spora, while strolling about in the jungle, got attracted towards a beautiful mermaid Queen who was plucking and eating the *namikron* fruit on the banks of the *Songdu* River. Eventually Mermaid Queen reciprocated his love and the happy pair reached the underwater caverns and married each other with much fun fare. Saora Spora enjoyed to the full all the wonders and activities which he witnessed in the underwater domain. The celebration over their marriage lasted for full 40 days and 40 nights. Saora Spora could now live under water comfortably and felt perfectly at home there. However one day Saora Spora begged his wife to accompany him on a visit to his maternal relations. She agreed to his proposal readily. Villagers at first were surprised to see him alive as they thought him dead but they all turned out to welcome the couple. But the best food and drink used by human beings were like gall to the Mermaid Queen. She could not enjoy anything given to her. She was not at all comfortable at land. Several days and nights were given to festivity at his village, drinking and merry making in honour of his unexpected return. Meanwhile the Mermaid Queen sat through it all fasting and waiting patiently for her husband to conclude his visit. Immersed in merry making, he had no idea that his wife was starving out of disgust for human food and drink. At last the Mermaid Queen entreated her husband to return to her home with her. He ignored her once again and continued his eating and drinking, asking her to wait a bit longer. Again and again his wife requested him to return to her underwater abode. But an empty headed, full stomached person seldom rightly imagines the pangs, hunger and thirst of another person. However the patient Mermaid remained fasting without raising objections for full 7 days and 7 nights.

Finally, unable to bear any longer the torture her husband was inflicting on her in detaining her indefinitely, the Mermaid Queen departed silently to her watery mansion alone.

4. Rongmathu, 1960:67-70
Barkataki, 1970:227-230

When the stupefying effect of the wine had passed, Saora Spora went to look for his wife. He tried to reach the underwater world but in vain as he had lost the power of remaining under water indefinitely. In great disappointment he decided to return to his native village. Dejected he sat on a rock by the edge of the pool. His wife saw him and ordered her biggest alligator and longest and largest electric eel to fetch his spirit to her. These two creatures were her servants. They obeyed promptly. The alligator caught hold of Saora Spora by the leg and dragged him into water, and the electric eel coiled about him and lashed him unmercifully. In a few moments Saora Spora was dead. His corpse lay floating on the surface of the pool, but his spirit known as *jachi* was brought by the alligator and the eel to the Mermaid Queen. The *Achiks* say that whenever mermaids desire a man or a woman, they dispatch his or her spirit to their underwater world and leave his or her body afloat as food for alligators, eel and other aquatic animals. Hence when anyone is drowned, the *Achiks* are accustomed to say that he or she has been taken away by a mermaid.

This folk tale speaks of the patience of the Queen in the face of indifference and torture inflicted on her by her unthinking husband who was only concerned about his own enjoyment. He was totally blind about the happiness of his wife. The wife on her part continued to bear all these with a lot of patience, which was expected of a woman in any society. Although her patience was most of the time considered her weakness, the wife was finally compelled to take a decision and leave her husband unwillingly, forced by circumstances, as she cannot possibly starve herself to death. Here is an example of a woman who could take a positive decision in the face of adversity. In her case her patience and love for her husband did not become her weakness which happens with most Indian women. She could break away from the chain of feminine expectation and responsibility which weigh her down so often. But we also have to take into account the fact that she is no ordinary woman, but a mermaid queen possessing supernatural power. In folktales supernatural beings from the other world and ordinary human beings mix side by side and only those women are depicted as somewhat powerful and who have some control over their life.

Sung-Ae Lee argued that in traditional folktales the attributes within the male schema (high esteem, authoritarian, strong, violent, transgressive,

protective, hunter/ powerful, quester, receiver, initiator, independent, active etc.) are always deemed superior to their binary opposite in the female schema (low esteem, submissive, beautiful, non-violent, obedient, pleasing, vulnerable, victim/powerless, prize, giver, self-effacing, dependent, passive); the “good” woman conforms to the attributes of the schema for femininity whereas the undesirable woman transgresses them. The alternative possible roles for women—passive victim or monster—reflect how folktale heroines are usually powerless unless they possess a power aligned with monstrosity and evil. This folktale portrays a woman who is powerful possessing supernatural power. She is active thus equated with evil. Through this supernatural power she brought the spirit of her husband to her underwater abode. The *Achiks* (Garos) say that whenever mermaids desire a man they dispatch his spirit to their underwater world and leave his body afloat as food for alligators, eels, and other aquatic animals. Although she possesses many attributes of the feminine schema by accompanying her husband to his village leaving behind her comfort zone, waiting patiently for her husband’s return etc, but the moment she decided to shed her passive image, and left alone to her own world she became active and thus a transgressor and finally an undesirable woman. Women cannot usurp the position of control in the marriage for which she was condemned to hell. A wife has to be submissive, husband-pleasing cooks who should be uncritical and above all silent.

The traditional subjection of the women is based mostly on the presumed moral superiority of the male. Sonia lee maintained that with this superiority comes responsibility. If the man abuses his rights and acts foolishly his wife will scorn him and if he repudiated his wife for no valid reason and as a result loses her forever. This exactly happened in the tale *Saora Spora* and the *Mermaid Queen*, where unable to bear with the injustice and neglect meted towards her by her husband, who was only too busy with his own enjoyment forgetting completely about his responsibility and commitment towards his wife, she left him and thus he loses her.

There exists no invisible bond knitting persons together; rather relationships generally become visible in the form of a gift. Here with the gift of

magical power that Saora Spora received from his wife made him capable of remaining underwater. But the relationships between characters do not create an inner bond but are externalized. Instead of building depth, they contribute to the flat appearance of the whole. Once Saora Spora came out of his underwater abode with his Mermaid wife, he indulged in merry making totally forgetting about the condition of his wife who could not take human food and was starving for seven days and nights. In spite of her continuous pleading he turns a deaf ear to her request of returning to her watery domain. The whole realm of sentiment is absent from folktale characters and as a result they lack psychological depth.

Garos are a matrilineal society where inheritance of property is through female line. Thus compared to patriarchal society women in matrilineal set up enjoy a comparatively better position. This fact is reflected in this Garo tale where power is exercised by the central character of the tale, the Mermaid Queen.

5.1.5 *Sammisi Samjanggi* (the magic millet)⁵

Khatchi and Indik were both exceedingly beautiful damsels. One day thinking of the magic millet called *Sammisi Samjanggi*, Khatchi made a vow:

“I will marry no man other than the one who will bring it to me, I shall die husbandless”.

Sammisi Samjanggi is found in a place the way to which is beset with various temptations, great difficulties, and manifold obstacles. It is eagerly sought after as it is capable of bestowing everlasting life, perpetual youthfulness, great strength, and freedom from fatigue and suffering upon its possessor. It also preserves the body of its owner from decay. Thousands of men who daily quest for the precious fruit, perish on the way to the desired goal. Some are being reborn as lower animals; others are being reincarnated as trees, plants and herbs.

The person who wants to obtain it must go alone and the way is long and torturous. On every step the seeker is tested. Khatchi, in her great desire for possessing the coveted fruit, sent her handsome lover, Dikki, to fetch it for her. He took with him his worthy younger brother, Bandi, and set forth on the perilous journey.

5. Rongmathu, 1960:272-273

As the two dauntless heroes passed through subterranean region, they were warmly welcomed and cordially greeted by Ahning Chire Chining Nore, a marvelously bewitching and beautiful woman. She is the guardian of the front door of the first entrance to the notorious pathway leading to the abode of the *Sammisi Samjanggi*. Her dwelling place is known as the origin of Evil. Here there are no judges, no penalties and punishment for those who commit heinous crimes.

When Dikki and Bandi presented themselves at the gate, the bewitching custodian tried to mislead them. But they refused to comply with her requests because they knew that getting involved with her and her husband would only turn them into ferocious beasts.

But after that nobody knew what had happened to them, as they never came back from their perilous journey. Some thought they were lost, some even hope that they would return one day. Khatchi, the beloved of Dikki and Indik, the beloved of Bandi, became immortal virgins, known as the celestial damsels. They were still waiting for the worthy brothers in the hope that they were alive and would return to them.

Here we see two very beautiful damsels who have strong desire to possess magic millet. In order to fulfill their much cherished desire, they decided that they would only get married to their respective beloveds once they become successful in bringing the said millet to them. Here we see two ambitious women who exercised their right to freedom in deciding their course of life. Khatchi and Indik, in order to get the thing of their desire (magic millet), sent their handsome beloveds for a long and torturous journey where thousands of men perish on the way to desired goal. When they never returned, these two women remained immortal virgins and kept waiting for their lovers to return. Thus they transcend their normal gender roles as submissive women. They pursued their dream and had the strength of character to wait endlessly for the fulfillment of their dream. This shows that although they pursued their dream through their beloveds but they were chaste and loyal to them in their absence. In matrilineal societies like Garos women enjoy relative freedom regarding their life, but values like chastity, loyalty are equally valued as assets in women.

5.1.6 *Jereno, the Orphan*⁶

Once Upon a time there lived in a village in *Achik Asong* an orphan boy named Jereng who had lost his parents when he was about 5 years old. He had nobody to turn to for help. So he entered forest himself in search of wild fruit and edible roots. As he penetrated deep into the forest he came upon a tree laden with delicious fruits which he immediately climbed to satisfy his great hunger.

While Jereng was in the tree eating fruits, a pair of terrible cannibals, half men and half tigers, known as the Matchadus came by. They were both hairy and looked violent. They espied the orphan high up in the tree and begged him some of the luscious fruits which he was eating. Jereng vigorously shook the tree causing a shower of fruit to descend near the couple. They failed to partake it. Instead they complained that the fruit had fallen on dirty grounds and was therefore polluted. They asked him to pluck some fruits by his own hand and lower it to them by means of his toes. Promptly the Matchadus seized him by feet, pulled him out of the tree, tied him up in a cage and carried him to their home. Their own son was about the same age as Jereng. Next day Matchadus asked their own child to kill Jereng and cook him for them while leaving for forest. The young Matchadus was looking at Jereng and asked him "we Matchadus are all dark-skinned. You men are fair-skinned. Pray, tell me how you become so". Jereng immediately got a chance to plan for his escape and told him to bathe in boil water. He himself boiled water and poured it on him. The young matchadus died instantly. Jereng hastily clad himself in his victim's clothes and smeared dirty black soot all over his body to resemble the dead boy. Then he cooked the body well for the parents' meal and as they returned he served them elaborately.

One day Jereng pretended that he was afflicted with great sorrow and tactfully wanted to know about their wealth. The parents in order to make him happy revealed to him all his possessions. Next day when they left the house, the orphan hid all their money, jewels and cloth on the opposite bank of the river. One day the boy who is actually a good swimmer took them to the river bank and asked them the permission to learn swimming. They initially refused but later on reluctantly gave him the permission. Within a short time he reached the

6. Rongmathu, 1960:100-104

other side of the river and divested himself of the clothes of the dead young Matchadus and shouted at them-

“you Matchadus have devoured your own child. I am free and have your wealth and precious cloth”. They were at rage but they could do nothing as both of them did not know how to swim. And finally following the wrong advice of the intelligent boy, they got drowned. Jereng with all his possessions wandered away from river side. By and by he came to a cave where python dwelt. He killed the huge snake, skinned the body whole, keeping the head intact, made long one piece bag of the skin into which he put his money, jewel and cloth. At night he himself slipped into the skin to sleep.

The cave in which Jereng concealed himself was near the *jhum* cultivation of a wealthy man who had two beautiful daughters. One day while the girls were driving away parrots and sparrows from their father's field, they passed the orphan's cave. Jereng saw them and fell in love with the younger sister. When the young girl cried out to shoot away the birds, the orphan answered her from inside the python skin; but he remained silent when the other girl shouted. Curiously the younger daughter went into the cave from which the strange sound came and saw Jereng emerging from the python skin.

Jereng was a very handsome young man with black glossy hair and strange muscular body. The girl fell in love with him on the spot. Jereng showed her all his money, jewels and precious cloth and said to her:

“If you want to marry me, hide yourself for several days; if your parents happen to find you, tell them that you want to be married to a python.”

After reaching home she did as the orphan had advised. When she was discovered by a servant after a lot of search, she was asked the reason for her unusual behaviour. Then she answered coyly: Because there is a python in a cave near our field that I wish to marry. Pray let me do so.”

The parents of the girl were shocked and could not believe this and retorted:

“But darling, you are so beautiful and accomplished. We have been looking for a nice young man to marry you to. Have you lost your

mind that you want to wed a python?" the girl however remained adamant. She even threatened to starve herself to death unless her parents give consent to her marriage to the python. Finally her demand was granted though reluctantly and the younger girl and the python were duly married. Jereng with all his money, jewels and cloth was inside the python skin, no one was aware of the fact except his bride. They were given a separate house to stay. After hearing a loud cry at midnight every one got scared. The father then and there sent some people to find out what has happened. They peeped into the dwelling house and saw a very handsome young man sitting with the young girl and reported everything to the girl's father. To find out for himself what exactly has happened, he went to the place and with his own eyes witnessed the handsome young man sitting with his daughter prinked with costly necklace. He also noted that the house was full of money, jewels and precious cloth. The father was astonished at this but at the same time he had a feeling of great happiness and contentment. The bride's elder sister now wanted to get married to a python after witnessing the happiness and fortune of her sister. This time she was wedded to a real python. At midnight on the wedding day the elder sister was heard to utter a loud cry. But this time everyone thought that similar things might have happened to her, so no one went there to find out what was really the matter with her. The next morning they realized that the bride was killed by the python that swallowed her. Immediately the python was killed and the elder daughter's dead body was found in his stomach.

But the fortunate younger sister decided not to reveal the truth about her husband. Instead she preferred to leave the world guessing and puzzled by the riddle of the difference between her good luck and her sister's sad misfortune. Later Jereng and his bride lived happily with their children and wealth.

Although this tale is male centered and woman plays a secondary role but her presence is felt even then. Jereng accomplished many adventures, escaped from his captors using his intelligence, became rich, married the girl he wanted and lived happily ever after. But what is striking is the character of the young girl who married the orphan. The young girl of the rich parents wanted to marry a python. The python happened to be a handsome young man, a fact which is only known to her. For the rest of the world the groom was a python. So naturally she went against the wishes of her parents but compelled them to agree to her

proposal of marrying the python. She was an independent woman capable of asserting herself for fulfilling her own desire. Witnessing her happiness and fortune, the elder sister also demanded and got married to a python. But unfortunately for her this python turned out to be a real one and caused her death. But the fortunate sister, never at any point in the tale revealed the secret of her husband. Rather she closely guarded the secret to the extent that she was not bothered about the well being of her own sister, who following her, was actually risking her life. What she meant was her own happiness. She was selfish from that angle, but she did what she wanted to do. And thus qualified as a woman having a mind of her own, one who was active, who was not deterred by emotion. This kind of woman character is rare to find but this became possible because Garo society is matrilineal where women enjoy better status. Among Garos women enjoy better mobility, economic freedom, independence, and also can place their opinion in front of the *mahari*. Thus this young girl also placed her wish and got it fulfilled. She dared to threaten her parents that if they do not allow her to marry the python then she will starve herself to death. The nubile Garo girl takes the initiative in matrimonial alliances. It is her prerogative to initiate decision making process. In this matter she is helped by the members of her *chra* (matrilineal kins) in Garo society.

Similar kind of story line is also found there in a Rabha folktale where a girl (own mother died) was married to a python. Difference is that in the Garo Tale the girl willingly, out of her own choice married the python whereas in the Rabha tale where society adheres to patriarchal norms, the girl was given to a python in marriage to keep the promise of the father. Her opinion was not sought and the step mother enjoyed the proceedings anticipating the end of the step daughter. But luckily for her, the python turned out to be a handsome god who gave her love and lavished her with gift and made her happy. Presentation of the same story is different in both the tales as the two societies are different.

Though tales travel and are adopted, some of the tales and motifs are rather fairly old and are closely linked with the modes of life and belief of particular communities. In the words of M.J. Herskovits: "A substantial body of folktales is more than the literary expression of people. It is, in a very real sense,

their ethnography which, if systematized by the student, gives a penetrating picture of their life.” (Herskovits 1949, p.418)

In the Garo tale the girl was active, but in the Rabha tale the girl was submissive and passive, hanging there to obey the dictates of the parents. She was rewarded at the end because she was obedient, self-sacrificing, silent and pleasing much to the satisfaction of the male dominated society. In the Garo tale, the girl was also happy but her happiness depended on her own action, will power, resolve. This is actually a reflection of the Garo society which is matrilineal where women are comparatively better off than the women in the pan Indian scenario. The Rabha girl was waiting patiently and passively, for a change in her destiny.

5.2 WOMEN IN HER NORMATIVE ROLE

The internalization of normative behaviour in the expected line of patriarchal set standard happens through the socialization process. Thus womanhood is confined within the roles of mother, daughter, wife, sister and beloved who are expected to be loving, loyal, Chaste, caring, submissive, patient, passive, obedient, obliging as a norm. Following a gendered division of labour, women and men in a society are not only assigned different roles and responsibilities, but their positioning are also valued differently and placed in rank order. Gender roles that accompany each status consist of realms of responsibility and sets of expectations of women and men in a society. Like the Rabha tales women in the Garo tales are expected to meet the challenges of the roles assigned to them.

5.2.1 *Daran and Opsora*⁷ (Daran and the celestial damsel)

A poor, healthy and honest peasant youth named Daran, once went up a clear hill-stream, known as *Chibok*, in *Achik Asong*, angling for fresh fish called *nahrongs*. As Daran angled up the stream alone wading in the beautiful pool flanked on both sides by tall primitive trees, he felt unusually happy and buoyant. His whole being was absorbed in

7. Rongmathu, 1960:46-53
Barkataki, 1970:212-217

the magnificent glory and grandeur surrounding him. Daran was more anxious to enjoy the woodland beauty than to catch many fish.

As he reached the upper stages of the stream, he stood still to gaze contentedly at this beautiful pool and its rock banks. The young man's heart almost split with happiness at the loveliness he experienced and understood. The pool seemed to be a fitting abode of fairies, nymphs etc. Daran sat on one of the many rocks and contemplated the peacefulness of the environment.

As he was sitting absorbed in his thought, Daran suddenly became aware of the presence of another person. Suddenly he saw a feminine figure of extraordinary beauty. He was struck dumb. All he could do was to watch with rapture the charming, bewitching maiden who was unaware of his presence. She on her part dived into the water with exquisite gracefulness. She swam with ease in the cool pool, as her tender arms and legs moved with perfect harmony.

The damsel was one of the celestial personages known as *Opsoras*. Her name was Juge Balji and her abode was in the ethereal regions. She could move through air as well as could make herself visible or invisible to human beings at her will. While swimming in the pool, she became conscious of the presence of human beings in the form of Daran, but continued to swim.

Daran now is determined to get acquainted with the enchanting girl. He decided to hide her snow-white garment which was kept on the bank. Conscience reproached him for his ungentlemanly behaviour; but he threw caution to the winds in order to get in touch with the irresistible creature. He finally reached the place and snatched the girl's clothes. No sooner had he done this than he heard a wild shriek from the pool. In a moment the girl was on the shore, clawing at him in a frantic effort to get back her garments and crying out in rage at the youth's bad behaviour. He smiled as she clawed and struck and scratched him. Unable to release her clothes from his clutch, she finally composed herself and asked him what did he want and why is he doing this?

Daran replied that her beauty has bewitched him and he wanted to marry her. She promised to marry Daran and introduced herself as one of the grand daughters of the Saka Misi Saljong, the ruler of the ethereal regions. Daran promptly gave her back her clothes. They promised to marry each other. The celestial damsel then gave her fiancé a white scarf

and requested him to wear it constantly for it endowed him with the power of floating above the ground and moving through the air on the manes of the wind just as she herself could. The two lovers then wondered about the clouds. All material and earthly cares and anxiety had left him. He now experienced supreme happiness and peacefulness. Shortly after that the damsel and Daran were formally married. They never tasted the joys of life on a carnal plane as mortal beings do. Instead their delights were on a higher spiritual plane. For full seven years the two dwelt together in great peace and joy.

After this period, Daran felt a great longing to see his own mother, father, sister and brother once more. When he expressed his desire in front of his celestial spouse she immediately permitted him to return to his native land but she promised to come back to him after three years at the most. She said that she would come to take him to their celestial home at the end of that stipulated period.

Daran's family members were extremely happy to see him again after he suddenly disappeared. To his family Daran appeared more like a supernatural than a human being. His voice had changed; his demeanour was noble and dignified, his whole being radiated health, strength and energy, now he was serious, thoughtful, earnest, taciturn and independent.

Daran after some time completely came to himself, shedding away his perplexity, and was happy to be among his family members. With joy he told them of his wonderful experience of the past seven years, of his meeting and marriage with the celestial damsel, of the celestial region, where he had dwelt, of his serene happiness and peace, of his blissful married life, on the unearthly beauty and power of his charming wife. Everyone listened to him but his mother was skeptical. She asked him if he is married where his children and wife are. Daran could not answer that because his love and marriage had been solely on a spiritual plane. But viewed from the earthly plane his was a meaningless tale. His listeners could not comprehend his narrative fully.

Slowly Daran adjusted himself to the worldly way of life. He started appreciating the simple joys and sorrows, the laughter and tears of normal human life once again. Some two years later Daran's mother engaged a lovely accomplished girl to be his wife. Initially he resisted her glances and smiles but after some time and wooing from her, his heart began to give away. At length he consented to marry her. His

married life revived in Daran all the physical and sensual appetite for the things of the world from which he had been free for so long. He became a man of the world once more. He was happy in the earthly way. At the end of the third year of his descent to the earth, his celestial wife appeared to him accompanied by three attendants.

One fair morning he was sitting with his wife who was holding their new born baby in her arms. For a while the celestial damsel and her attendants simply floated about the young man and stared at him in wonder. Daran raised his eyes and beheld them. Suddenly there rushed upon him memories of the past joys he knew and cherished. His heart sank in disillusionment when he realized how he had been twisted around an earthly woman's finger. He realized that what a fool he had been to consent to marry a human being. He loathed himself for that.

He could only see the damsel and her attendants. His earthly wife was totally unaware of the terrible crisis through which her husband was passing. The young man watched the face of his celestial wife. He saw its look of surprise change into sneer of scorn. He realized that his end is near. The celestial damsel still spoke nothing to him. She merely continued to stare at him hard and long. In an instant Daran saw the events of his whole life. He felt he was losing his senses. His soul realizing that it could no longer stand the searching, imperturbable gaze of the damsel, at last cried out in despair: "I am not worthy, I am not worthy. Ah me" .with this horrible cry Daran toppled down dead at the feet of his earthly wife. She could not understand what exactly happened as she could not see the celestial damsel. She shrieked out in horror. None of them could find a sensible explanation for his sudden demise. Everything was shrouded in mystery for them. No one could find the real cause of the great tragedy. The earthly wife of the deceased man did not live long. Soon she died of a broken heart.

Here we encounter three women characters. Daran's beautiful celestial wife, who possesses supernatural power making her dominate the proceedings in the tale, Daran's mother who influenced upon him to get married and his earthly wife. Daran's mother is the one who advised his earthly wife ways to win the heart of Daran which she did follow and could successfully win over him. So we see that in folktales women are only powerful and can dominate men when they possess supernatural power or master black art or magic. Otherwise she has to

accept what inevitably falls on her; the way Daran's wife did, and died of broken heart after her husband's demise. She remained a passive character who cannot act on her own.

In folktales the human hero acquires supernatural powers only as the results of an encounter with a being whose out worldly nature is explicit. Everyday characters and otherworld characters are thus distinguished in the folktale, as in the legend, but in the folktale these actors stand side by side and freely interact with one another. Everyday folktale characters do not feel that an encounter with an 'other' world being is an encounter with an alien dimension. This can be seen in this Garo folktale "*Daran and Opsora*" where Daran fell in love with a celestial damsel who possesses magical power and can remain visible and invisible at her will. They married and she took him to her celestial abode and also empowered him with magical power for seven years. He lived with his celestial wife happily and comfortably without any confusion or disagreement of any kind. But when he returned to his earthly home, to his ordinary self, there too he adjusted well with his earthly wife.

Folktale hero does not hesitate to marry an 'other' world bride, whether a celestial damsel, a fairy or a mermaid queen or a witch or a witch's daughter who is endowed with magical skills. He notices nothing disturbing about her.

The characters depicted in folktales have no inner life, no environment, no relationship to past or future generations, and no relationship to time. Thus Daran comes back home to his earthly abode, adjusted and got married effortlessly. The past has little bearing on his presence, it is only when his celestial wife made an appearance after 3 years, and he felt a kind of anxiety and died inexplicably without offering a reason to his family. Similarly in the tale "*Saora Spora and the Mermaid Queen*", Saora Spora came back to his home and adjusted quickly in his home although he was equally comfortable in his underwater abode. Among the various characters of the folktale there exists no firm, lasting relations. They exist according to the demand of the plot.

The celestial wife, possessing occult power had taken the upper hand in this tale. When she came to earth, to take Daran back she found him married once

again. This was an act of betrayal on Daran's part. The celestial wife could not forgive him for that and gave him a hard and strong glance full of scorn, something which he could not stand. He could not resist the charm of the earthly bride although initially he tried to resist the temptation. His mother insisted on getting him married and settling down which he could not ignore for long specially when the girl was chosen and guided by her. The ties between a mother and son in South Asia are notoriously intense and Daran could not but listen to his mother.

Daran died quite inexplicably. May be he died of mortification. He was extremely embarrassed in front of his celestial wife (*Opsora*). It was the fear of the public disclosure of his past which brought his death. He could not stand and face the questions and scorn in the eyes of *Opsora*, which he could only see. At the same time he did not have an answer to his earthly wife. Torn between the two, he did not know how to face the dilemma.

5.2.2 Raja Abong Noga and his Queen⁸

Raja Abong Noga was once the king of *Achikland*. There came a time when the land of *Achik Asong* was smitten with a grievous drought and famine and the plains and hills of *Achik Asong* became arid deserts incapable of supporting life. The drought lasted for seven long years.

Raja Abong Noga enforced assigned labour on his subjects when they were all hard up for food and drink. He built a huge long *machan* house on a ridge of the *Mongro* Hill, over looking the *Brig Wari*, a deep pool in the *Simsong* River. For the maintenance of it, he assigned various tasks to different villages in his kingdom. At the end of terrible drought the subjects of Raja Abong Noga revolted against him; for they could no longer remain in the galling subjection in which they were placed in the fair land of *Achik Asong*.

They first killed his second eldest daughter, then third and the fourth, one by one. After that they attacked his guard and tried to capture the King and the Queen themselves. But Raja Abong Noga and his Queen, Slime Dekka escaped, fled to the top of the *Nokrek* Hill and settled there.

8. Rongmathu, 1960:08-10
Barkataki, 1970:184-185

This Queen knew little about manual work. She did not even know how to cook rice and curry. As for raising rice, corn, millet and other grains and cereals, it was completely beyond her comprehension. She had a few servants, but they had accompanied the fugitive Queen more out of curiosity than loyalty. They wanted to enjoy themselves at her bewilderment in domestic affairs. So they adroitly teased her in every way and would do nothing to reduce her suffering.

One day the wretched Queen out of sheer necessity begged the servants to instruct her in the art of sowing paddy, millet and corn. They told her that she must partially boil the grains so as to aid them in speedy germination and place them precisely in the earth by means of a wooden dibble. The queen gullibly followed their advice to the very letter and she was completely puzzled when she discovered later that her carefully sown seeds did not germinate.

Again one day she asked the servants how to split the firewood, and her servants answered "we are accustomed to split it over our knees". The Queen naively followed this treacherous advice and died from the deep wounds she received on her knee while performing the task. Raja Abong Noga's third daughter, Meje Rani, had an infant daughter. This baby was in the arms of one of Meje Rani's women servants at the moment when Meje Rani was murdered by her subjects. The murderers wanted to kill Meje Rani's daughter too but the kind hearted woman servant named Nogang, said to them "no, no, this is my own daughter, not Meje Rani's. You can not kill her". The woman servant thus told lies to the murderous subjects as she passionately desired to preserve the precious royal seed. The woman servant carefully nursed and brought up the royal baby who in the course of time grew into a beautiful young girl. This daughter of Meje Rani was called Keme. Keme was ultimately married to Ushung Raja, who was one of the sons of Gobela Magenpa. Nogang clarified the true history of Keme before Gobela Magenpa and his son Ushung.

In this tale we see two women characters, one is the Queen and another is the woman servant. The queen had absolutely no knowledge about household chores. She did not know how to cook rice and curry. As a result she was desperate and did not know how to manage her home. Servants who accompanied her took advantage of her lack of knowledge and finally misled her and wrongly advised her causing death to her. This shows that a woman needs the required

skill to run her house properly. Irrespective of her social position a woman is considered successful and measured as per her skills in managing household duties. It does not matter whether she is a queen or an ordinary woman, because she needs to know all the domestic works well for the smooth functioning of her home. Since the Queen was totally uncomfortable at it, as she did not have the required skills and knowledge she had to suffer bitterly. Thus a woman is judged according to her performance within the four walls of the household.

Again the woman servant who told lies to save the young royal girl child from the clutch of the murderers is an example of woman who has kindness and motherly affection amply in her. Here the woman is seen as a loving and caring figure.

5.2.3 Origin of the Garo Phratrics⁹

The tale reveals the overwhelming passionate love of Bohol, one of the descendants of *Achik Shangma* for the daughter of his mother's younger sister. Bohol openly wanted to marry her and went on wooing her for seven years. But the chaste younger matrilineal sister did not give in to his persuasion. She could never think of committing the sin of incest, which was considered the most abominable sin among her tribe. Because of her firmness of will, she was given the name of *Marak*, which means the mother who is firm and rigidly chaste. (Ma means mother, and rak means firm or strong).

This tale reaffirms that in any society women's chastity is highly valued and chastity is expected of a woman in the larger Indian context. When it comes to men a big silence is maintained because in our society it is believed that a woman needs to be chaste and loyal in order to protect the integrity of the household. Men are more or less forgiven for the sin or crime they commit. We see here the presence of a strong willed woman.

5.2.4 Mese (the rat)¹⁰

There was a family of rats in the *Achik* land. The father was killed in a trap laid down by human being. Now mother and their only

9. Rongmathu, 1960:293-295

10 Holdesh N. Sangma, 68: Pilingkata, Kamrup

son were living. One day a man laid a trap to catch rats. Experienced mother could sense the danger. To lure rats the man kept a banana inside the trap. The son got interested to lay his hand on it. But the wise mother prohibited him by saying that he would fall in danger and also reminded him how his father got trapped in a similar situation and was killed. For a moment the son pretended as if he is listening to her word of caution. But when the mother slept at night, he came out silently and tried to eat the banana kept inside the trap. Immediately he got locked inside. And finally the inevitable happened as the mother feared and he too got killed. Thus he lost his life for not listening to the wise advice of the mother who had all the experience of life.

Every mother wants to guide her children in the right direction depending on her own knowledge and experience. She always wants a better and secured future for them. Here the son (rat) lost his life as he refused to listen to the advice of the mother. A mother is the best well wisher of her child. The moment a child forgets that he/she falls into trouble. Here the woman failed to protect the child despite her best effort. This can also be seen as a reflection on how male world belittles a woman's knowledge and judgement as inferior to them. This might also be seen as one of the reasons why the mother's advice and word of caution was not taken seriously by the son.

5.2.5 *The Staircase to the Moon*¹¹

Among the *Achiks* in *Achik Asong*, there lived in very ancient days a man named Jarang. He had a beautiful wife and a fine looking son still in the early teens. Jarang loved his wife and child more than anything else in life and always tried to please them in every possible way.

One day as he was sitting with his beloved wife and child in the open courtyard of his house they saw the moon appear in all its glory high up in the clear sky. The child was quite thoughtful and watched it closely and finally cried out to his father:

“Oh, that beautiful moon! How I wish I could grasp it in my hands and play with it. Father, please fetch it for me to play with.”

11. Rongmathu, 1960:81-2
Holdesh N. Sangma, Pilingkata:2012

The father tried to make him understand that it is not at all possible to fetch the moon and explained to him that moon was far away and there was no solid road for him to travel to get it. But the spoilt child refused to budge and cried incessantly and insisted on having the moon. He even refused food and drink. As a result he grew pale and haggard-looking. Jarang's wife unable to endure the distressing tantrums of the child any longer, scolded her husband, saying-

"Do you wish the doleful cries of the child should continue till he dies? Surely, had you tried you could have fetched the moon for him. Why not construct a staircase to the moon and drag it here within our reach once and for all."

Jarang, unable to bear the constant nagging of his wife and persistent crying of his child any longer, ventured out to accomplish the impossible task. Thus with the assistance of his nephew he decided to build the staircase to the moon. For this purpose he gathered enormous quantities of wooden posts and bamboos wherewith to raise the intended structure and piled up the needful material in one place. Jarang got busy in erecting one staircase upon another. At one point Jarang himself started believing that he was now certainly nearing the moon. He shouted from above to his nephew below:

"Bring up bamboos. Bring up bamboos". His wife and nephew on the ground far below could not catch his words distinctly. To them it sounded as if he was shouting exultantly:

"I've got the moon. I've got the moon. Hew down the staircase".

Again and again they listened attentively and the same message seemed to be wafted down. The obedient nephew took up an axe and hewed down the main pillars of enormous structure. Soon it fell with a tremendous crash, propelling Jarang through space to a distant place where he was killed instantaneously. Not finding his fallen body his wife and nephew waited expectantly for many days for him to return bearing triumphantly in his hands the cherished moon. But he did not return. Jarang's wife and nephew angrily concluded that he had furtively fled to the abode of the moon and the stars. The fallen heap of staircase afterwards became a small range hills.

In Sangma's version tantrum creating child was a daughter and he stressed on the unreasonable demand of the daughter as the cause of the tragedy,

but in the version collected by D.S. Ronhmathu, the blame was laid more on the wife who supported the unjustified demand of the son. She was blind in love for her son. The wife was shown as foolish but in the version given by H.N. Sangma, the daughter's pestering for the ungettable resulted in the father's demise.

Here we see a happy family, where the husband loved his wife and child more than anything else. His attachment to his family was so much that to please them and to avoid the constant nagging of his wife he ventured out to accomplish the impossible-that is to fetch the moon. Women's love for children sometimes proves to be harmful and in this tale the mothers over indulgence proved fatal.

The wife was foolish and lacks brain. In most tales women are presented as lacking intelligence and brain, qualities associated with men. As a mother she was so concerned about the well being of her son that she made an unreasonable demand which brings trouble to the man who could not do anything except obeying her to get relief from her constant nagging. In a Garo proverb also we find that women are not respected and thought of as lacking in intelligence as for instance the proverb *Domak wagam gri, michik gisik gri* meaning just as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brain. This view gets reflected in the tale. Thus man can not and must not trust women without bringing misfortune on himself.

5.3 OPPRESSED WOMEN

Manliness in folktales mean complete domination of the women either verbally or brute force. It is regarded as an everyday part of marriage that a husband should threaten his foolish wife with a chiding or if he feels necessary he can even slap or beat her up. Ill treatment of the woman by the husband is accepted by society as well as by the women herself as normal.

5.3.1 *Dempo's Secret*¹²

In the tale *Dempo's Secret*, reference has been made to the practice of polygamy which was allowed in the Garo custom. As a Garo, Dempo was allowed to marry as many wives as he wished but he was happy with his only wife whom he loved dearly. Dempo has a secret and

12. Rongmathu,1960:61-66
Goswami,1980:208-212
Barkataki,1970:223-227

his wife wanted to know his secret. Dempo had a weird gift whereby he could understand the conversations of animals, birds and insects. However this gift could cause his immediate death the moment he divulged it to anyone. One day he was laughing at the conversation between an ass and a bullock. His wife immediately wanted to know why he was laughing. Dempo somehow managed to deceive her by saying that he was laughing in his sleep. Although she kept quiet she was not at all convinced at his reply. Since this thing kept on happening again and again, Dempo's wife smelt something fishy. In order to get his secret out, she began one of her accustomed tantrums, reproaching him bitterly, and accusing him of breach of promise. Not being able to stand his wife's nagging any longer Dempo was ready to divulge the secret to his wife even if it means bringing an end to his life. That night prior to his secret sharing he heard the boastful proclamation of his cock in front of his faithful dog who was very upset at the impending danger to his master's life. The cock was saying-

"What kind of a man is our master anyhow? He must be a jelly-fish to allow himself coerced into death by the impertinence of a woman. Indeed he must be a despicable weakling to be so overruled by a woman. I myself have thirty or forty hens as my wives; and I keep them all under perfect control. They are happy and contented. You see me the epitome of happiness. And our master, being a man, cannot control one measly woman. What kind of a man is he, I repeat? Shameful, disgraceful, obnoxious. Were I he, I would have made her fully aware of the fact that it is none of her business to pry into affairs which do not concern her in the least". After listening to the cock's speech the dog also came to the conclusion that the good man should not allow himself to be tormented by his wife's importunities. He ought not to permit himself to be henpecked. A sound slap or two from him would have silenced her.

Dempo could overhear every word of their conversation and thus resolved to give his wife the thrashing she rightly deserves. As his wife sat by his side to listen to the secret, his attitude changed and he sternly warned her to be silent, clearly intimating that it was not her business to meddle with his secret. The duped wife, there upon began one of her accustomed tantrums, reproaching him bitterly and accusing him of breach of promise. To drive home his warning Dempo immediately stood up, caught hold of his wife by her hair and thrashed her thoroughly until her aggressive spirit was fully curbed. With pain

and mortification at her disgrace, Dempo's subdued wife solemnly promised not to ask him any more questions regarding his secret. They perfectly reconciled with each other and lived happily ever after.

Knowledge of animal speech is a skill which proves convenient to the heroes of a number of tales. It enables the hero to understand the language of animals. This trait is old and widespread in folklore and mythology. As reconstructed by Aarne, the generalized form of the tale is as follows-

“A snake who wishes to repay a man for a favour teaches him the language of animals, but does so under the condition that he shall never say anything to anyone about it: if he should do so he must die. In his home one day the man hears two animals talking together and their conversation amuses him so that he laughs at it. When his wife sees him laughing when there is apparently nothing to laugh at, she demands to know the cause. The man hesitates to tell her and says that he must die if he should ever tell anybody the reason. The wife, however, insists upon her demand. Finally the man makes up his mind to satisfy the curiosity of his wife, and prepares to die. But just then he chances to hear another animal conversation. The male animal (usually a cock) speaks words of warning about a man who can maintain no discipline in his house, but who is thinking about dying for the sake of his wife. The man takes these words to heart and refuses to betray the secret.”

(*Folktale* :Stith Thompson; 83)

Both on account of the frequent appearance of this story in the older literary texts of India and because of the stability of the oral variants of India and surrounding countries, there seems little doubt that the tale has been brought into Europe from the East. It appears in such notable Oriental collections as the *Ramayana*, *Jātaka* (both the Indian and the Chinese forms), *Twenty-Five Tales of a Vampire*, the Persian *Tuti-Nameh*, and *Thousand and One Nights*. Its presence in medieval Europe is indicated by its appearance in the *Gesta Romanorum*, in a novella of Morlini and in Straparola's collection of tales. But in spite of this literary background the story has been adopted by the people and has become a part of the repertory of oral tales in almost every country of Europe. It is especially common in Finland and the Baltic states. In the near East and in India it is well established. Beyond India it is known at least in Annam and Java. It is

one of the most popular of all foreign tales which have been taken over by African tribes. (*Folktale* :Stith Thompson, 84)

The story gives us the impression that a wife is to be kept under a man's control and if situation demands she can be beaten to keep her silent. The wise man (here the Cock) knows the female psyche and will act accordingly. It is perfectly acceptable to the society if a woman is slapped or beaten to restore male superiority and command inside the household. The conversation of the cock and the dog represents the male point view which wants to establish male supremacy in the line of patriarchal society. Although Garo society is matrilineal, for all practical purposes it is the man who is the ruler of the family and the household. And a man is expected to have the control over his wife or wives provided he caters to her day today needs. Susan Wadley observes: "*folktales are not necessarily used to teach, but even those told for entertainment often contain biting commentaries on social situations and incorporate and substantiate key cultural beliefs.*" (Wadley, 2000a:218). The traditional subjection of the woman is based mostly on the presumed moral superiority of the male and not on his physical superiority or his economic power. Tales thus concentrate on moral weaknesses of women, with many faults. A presumed lack of character equates her with a child. Sonia Lee maintained that negative image of women is a product of the male psyche; the women probably identifies with it and accepts without much difficulty this image given to her by male for it comes from the one who possesses power and presumably wisdom. One can hardly analyze the cultural expectations and interactional processes that construct gender inequality without attention to the actions of the members of the dominant group. We must pay close attention to what men do to preserve their power and privilege. Schwalbe et al.:2000, suggested that one process involved is when super ordinate groups effectively "other" those who they want to define as subordinate, creating devalued statuses and expectations for them. The cultural significance attached to male bodies signifies the capacity to dominate, to control, and to elicit deference and such expectations are perhaps at the core of what it means for men to do gender.

Folktales show us flat figures rather than human beings with active inner lives as nowhere is this internal emotional state expressed. Dempo's wife was bashed up by Dempo to keep her silent and under his control; she showed no psychological distress and conflicts that might arise within her as a result. She was instead depicted as living happily ever after. The tale did not show the woman's psychological reaction. She was shown as living happily after the bashing she received from her husband as it was perfectly acceptable for a woman to admit the man as the head of his household and master of his wife. If not his virility would be questioned and he would lose the respect of the community. A man beats his wife like a father beats his child-out of necessity. If a wife is stronger in character and smarter than her husband, he will become the laughing stock of the whole village. As he will be ridiculed it is his duty to punish his wife to prove himself and his superiority. Thus the woman cannot but be happy.

5.3.2 *The Mother of Salt*¹³

There was a dirty looking old woman. Her whole appearance was disgusting but she was a great cook and every dish became delicious under her skillful handling. But she was extremely afraid of water. She never bathed nor washed her hands, feet or face. Her daughter was equally filthy like her. The son in law of the woman enjoyed the dishes of curry, soup and chutney, etc prepared by her. But he felt sick of the layer of dirt in her body as well as his wife. So one day he requested both of them to take a bath to clean themselves. He even lectured them on the virtues of cleanliness, but it had no effect on them. They flatly refused his request. He then again persuaded them to influence, but when that even failed, he decided to use force. It pricked his pride to be disobeyed by mere women. To prove his superiority over them, he roughly dragged both the mother (mother of salt) and the daughter, i.e. his wife (Karitchi) to the river side. On their way Karitchi requested her husband with tears in her eyes, not to act so rashly. In the struggle with him the daughter managed to escape from the clutches of her husband and run away. But the unfortunate mother-in-law could not save herself from the grip of the son-in-law as she was dragged to the river. The daughter of the unfortunate woman cried in vain at the needless cruelty

13. Rongmathu, 1960:227-228

and hardheartedness of her husband. As the mother-in-law was thrown into the water she soon dissolved and vanished completely before his very eyes. The daughter cried inconsolably at the death of her mother and roamed here and there for consolation from trees, plant and herbs. One day the damsel, still weeping, jumped into the water to discover the spirit of the mother of salt. Her congealed tear drops became pearls inside the ocean.

This tale reflects on the cruelty of man towards women. This includes from physical abuse, use of force and ultimately to the extent of killing. Violence against women (both mother in-law and wife) shows that irrespective of the social order, even in matriarchal societies like Garos, this kind of use of raw physical power is very much common. If we believe that tales reflect the society in some form, as Stephens and McCallum argue (1998) that "*traditional stories and folktales have important cultural functions. They serve to initiate audiences into aspects of a social heritage transmitting many of a culture's central values and assumptions and a body of its shared allusions and experiences*". We see that use of violence against women is legitimized to prove male superiority. The tales prove that this kind of violence and physical torture is expected from a man and he is not questioned. Tales after tales we get description of male violence in some pretext or other and their conduct was justified. Sonia Lee observed that woman is treated like a child who must be guided and punished if need be.

Ramanujan's model can be applied to Garo folktales like *Dempo's Secret* or *Mother of Salt*. Garo society is matrilineal where women are believed to enjoy better position. But contrary to the popular belief, some folktales show that there is reversal of a normal order, position or relation. Tales reflect the domination of males and perceived male superiority over womenfolk. In these two tales there is male domination to the extent of using raw physical power against women to make her silent and to keep them under male control. Any kind of assertion by women is not tolerated by the dominant group.

5.4 WOMEN AS TRANSGRESSORS

Women who try to overcome male domination or control through their acts are termed as transgressors and as such their act is considered subversive.

Ramanujan opines that subversion/inversion of a normal order or relation is found in folktales (Dharwadker, 1999). But this subversion is not always conscious on the women's part. In many cases it might be unconscious or subconscious.

5.4.1 End of the First Tree¹⁴

Every living creature in the whole world came to attend the funeral rites of Susimema Sangkildoma, the goddess who is the common mother of all plants and living beings. On that day Meen Mechik Rongling Tira, the wife of GijaGingbo Ah-igija Chalo Mehsigija, asked her husband to let her go and attend the funeral as well.

Husband Gingbo permitted her to go but said that since every living being would be present at the funeral ceremony she should conduct herself carefully. As he had noticed earlier that she had the tendency of exchanging questionable smiles with Rengra Balsa Sriri Budhi, Manna kanga, Saron Benga, he cautioned her that he did not want her to exchange further smiles or words with them. Moreover she should not spend the night in that place, and advised her-

“Drink in silence; eat with caution and keep due decorum while you are there. Tarry no longer than is necessary. Come back home quietly.”

When Meen Mechik arrived at her destination, she attracted the attention of Rengra Balsa. The perfect symmetry of her whole body appealed to his artistic eyes. He desired to have the beautiful damsel. He asked one of his friends to offer and make her drink more and more wine of best quality.

Meen Mechik, forgetting her husband's caution ate and drank more than enough. By nightfall she was dead drunk. When she was deep in sleep, Rengra Balsa challenged Amak Meha Khale Phante to tattoo her by means of a bluish mixture known as *Chirama Khalema Aldama Thangsikma*. The man accepted the challenge and tattooed her without her knowledge. When she woke up, she saw the unsightly blemish on her body and fumed in utter rage and disgust:

“This playing on pranks on me is indecent and improper. I cannot forgive the rash perpetrator of this mischievous foul joke. I will

14. Rongmathu, 1960:268-270

tell my husband what has happened. I will show the scandalous marks to my spouse”.

She ran to her husband and narrated the whole story. When she showed the tattoo marks her husband became furious with anger. Taking his *milam* (two edged sword) in his hands, he rushed out of his house and hurried to the place where his wife was insulted. With a view to find the real culprit, Gingbo closely interrogated all the male members present. When this failed to produce any result, he challenged each one to prove his innocence by taking a solemn oath and biting the blade of his *milam*. One by one, the males came forward and swore innocence by biting the *milam*. But Amak Meh-a, smarting under the sense of his guilt, recoiled from the sacred oath and would not come forward to bite the sword. Accordingly guilt was fixed on him. Perceiving the menacing attitude and infuriated looks of Gingbo, Amak Meh-a took to his heels without much ado. He finally hid himself under the armpit of *Siram Racha Bolking Gitil*, the first tree, who graciously welcomed the fugitive and openly offered protection. Gingbo asked the big tree to give him up who is concealing under her armpit, so that he could fight him and kill him.

Siram Racha proudly retorted that Gingbo should not threaten a guest who has taken refuge with her. Because she considers herself a common refuge of all beings in times of needs.

With anger in his heart Gingbo listened to the insulting words of the first tree and vowed vengeance on mighty *Siram Racha* too. Accordingly he took help from his parental relations. With their assistance and support in this hour of humiliation he decided to defeat the formidable enemy. So in a short time, a terrible assault was made on the common enemy and *Siram Racha* was over thrown, her branches were severed and her trunk split lengthwise.

Meen Mechik, the wife of Gingbo, was permitted to go in a funeral ceremony on condition that she conducts herself carefully. There was a word of caution from the husband, which expects her to fulfill all the norms of femininity by the male world. When she forgot the caution and ate and drank more than enough she crossed the boundary, like Sita who also crossed the line of caution demarcated for her safety by Lakshman. Both of them faced trouble after that,

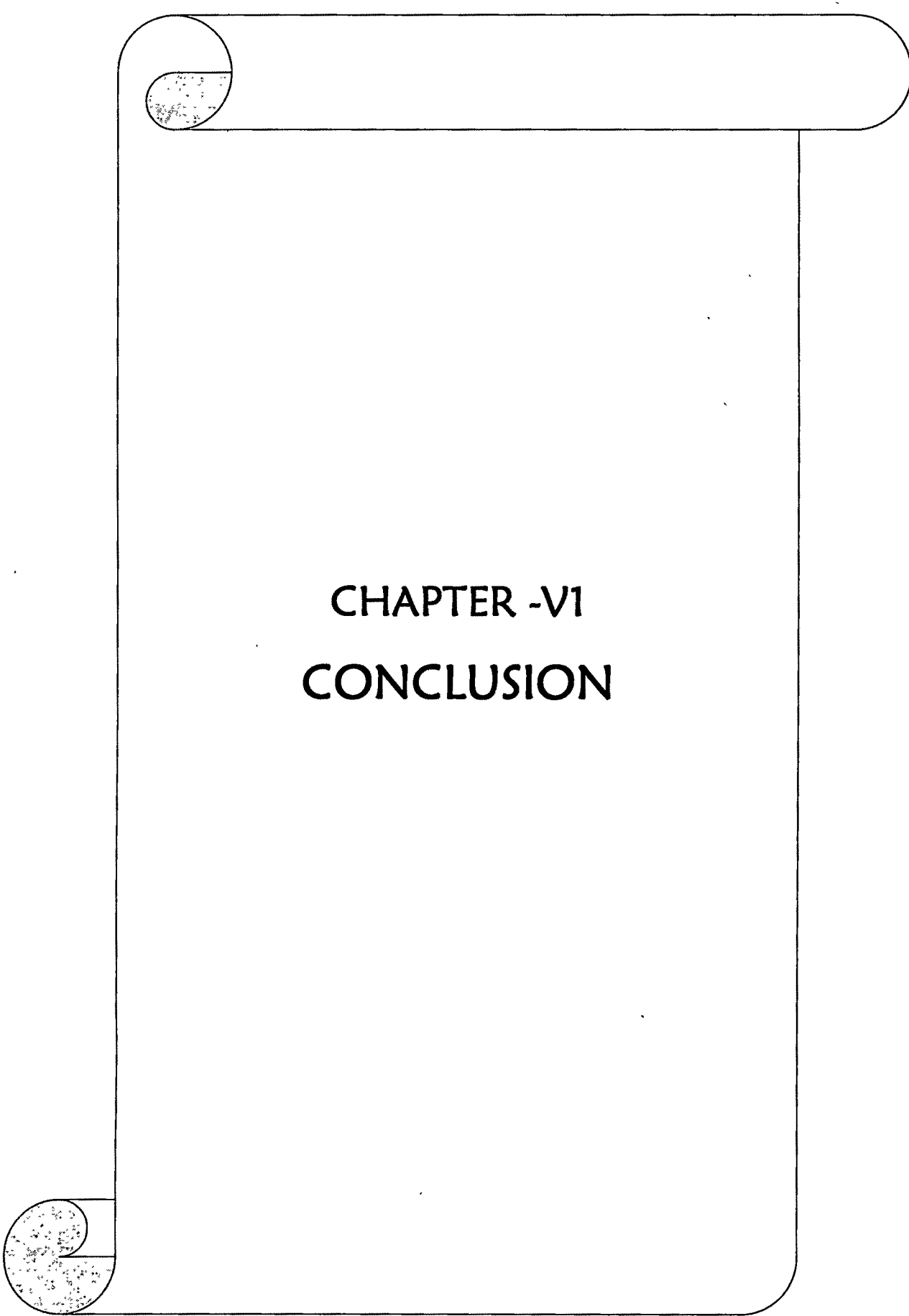
Sita was kidnapped by Ravana and Meen Mechik was tattooed without her knowledge taking advantage of her intoxicated state.

Her act of drinking more could be interpreted as an act unconscious subversion. She did not listen to her husband and did what she liked, could be termed as a mark of protest and assertion of herself against the domination. As a result she was tattooed which means she was branded by the society as immoral. Her act of protest or asserting herself had made her an immoral woman in the eyes of the male world. In doing completely opposite to her husband's wish she might have tried to subvert patriarchal gender relations. Going out and freely enjoying life in full public view is not expected from a woman. Woman should be confined within the four walls and be silent. She can not exercise freedom.

The husband who stood in her honour and tried to find out the culprit also is a stereotype of a male whose duty is to protect his wife in her distress.

The big tree under which the culprit took the shelter was punished for her act of being the protector. As she went against the norm and protected an evil doer, she was punished.

Both the women in this tale took a stand and asserted themselves. The tree was punished because she acted against the society's notion of good and bad. She followed her own judgement which was not allowed by the male world. Independent woman who acts on her own, needs to be punished to preserve male hegemony. Male superiority can not be challenged. Her act of not handing out the person who took shelter under her arms is an act of subversion. Even when done from a relatively disempowered position this resistance is an exercise of power in the social construction of meaning. She defied male authority. Edward R. Lee observes in *Psyche as Hero* that patriarchy creates role models for people which are inhibiting and stereotypical but when a woman finds herself capable of breaking chains of patriarchal cultures around her and acts in this direction she becomes a woman hero. Both the women are here seen as transgressors. They disobeyed the role set for them. The tree went against society in protecting the culprit and the wife went against her husband's wish and prohibition in enjoying life in full public glare.



CHAPTER -VI
CONCLUSION

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CONCLUSION

This study is based on secondary sources as well as field works in the districts of Kamrup (Rural and Metro) and Goalpara and was carried out over a period of four years. The fields study gave me the opportunity to collect some new tales along with some new versions of the already existing tales, not recorded in print so far. Moreover it also allowed me to experience the life style of the society particularly, the day to day life of the women of these two communities.

This thesis is an attempt to understand representation of women in the tribal societies of Assam; however it is not possible to work among all the tribes. Therefore, two tribes, namely, The Garos and the Rabhas, living in Southern part of Assam were selected. The reason of selection is that they are neighbouring tribes and one tribe is matrilineal and the other adheres to patriarchal set up. Moreover they have linguistic affinity.

The aim of the study is to find how women in the tribes like Rabhas and Garos are represented through a content analysis of their own folktales. Folk literature gives better projection of the social and cultural life of a community. Role played by women in these two cultures is discussed, thereby the exploration of the society, where women form an integral part and how women are represented in the tales which are a reflection of the society. The songs and tales are transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition, which is mainly preserved by women folk of any society. Women sing folk-songs and narrate folktales in the domestic sphere as well as in social gathering.

In this endeavour an attempt has been made to study folktales in the context of tribal societies (two) of Assam. A study has been completed by exploring data from districts of Assam, namely Kamrup (Rural & Metro) and Goalpara. The data has been collected from field work which facilitated use of observation and informal interview in different villages and meetings of people

and also from the already printed collection of folktales of more than one version and collections). Folkloristic analysis of tales depicting women is followed. While doing the content analysis of tales I have used perspectives propounded by famous folklorists like A.K Ramanujan who worked on folktales, Zack Zipes, Torbong Lundell, Aarne and Thompson, P.D. Goswami, J.L. Fisher and some others. Feminist thinkers of different schools as for instance Bell Hooks, Gilbert and Gubar, Irigaray and some others' views and observations are also used in interpretation along with psychological approach as propounded by Sudhir Kakar. (Chapter I). Kirin Narayan's views and observations are also used from time to time who worked on Kangra Folktales in the Northern part of India.

Chapter II, deals with gender concepts and theories that have evolved in the study of folklore since 70's onwards. Review was done to see how gender has emerged as a relevant category in the folk narrative since 1970s. Folk narratives after all are "Sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires... (they)... continue to play a privileged function in the reproduction of various social construct including gender and narrative" (Bacchilega, 1993:11). Mention needs to be made of the observation of Margaret Mead; an anthropologist who pointed out in one of her studies that human behaviour is conditioned by the demand of the situation in which one is placed irrespective of male and female. Patriarchal social set up is responsible for assigning submissive role for women and dominant role for men in our society. Thus it is noticed that socialization as a continuous process helps to learn the normative behaviour expected from women and thus women are conditioned to accept the subordinate position. As a result of this the discrimination which was done against women by the society is sustained by women themselves.

It was observed that public discourse on gender is recognized both through formal teaching and informal messages from folk stories, folk songs, riddles and proverbs, conversation with friends. Chapter proceeds to have an understanding of folktales in general, stressing on how and when it is introduced in the print, characteristics and special features of folktales are discussed. Referring Max Lüthi form and nature of folktales are also discussed. It is also noticed that like other disciplines, the study of folk narrative is influenced by the

gendered views of its theoreticians to the extent that the very tool of folk narrative research like the Aarne-Thompson tale type and motif listings are subjects to gender bias, as many researchers have established. (Chapter II)

This chapter deals with the ethnographic account of the two tribes under study-the Rabhas and Garos. The ethnic identity, history of the migration to their present settlement area, geographical distribution, life-style and livelihood pattern, dwelling, their social life, tradition and custom, rituals and festivals, status of women, their position in the societies of Garos and Rabhas are also being studied. When we take into account different opinion of scholars regarding origin of the tribes we find that many scholars have acknowledged similarities between the Rabhas and the Garos. Dalton holds that the Rabha customs, with the exception of the laws of inheritance and marriage, resemble those of the Garos or those of the Panikoches” (Dalton, 1872, p.87). Allen is of the opinion that “the Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appears to be an offshoot of the Garos” (Allen, 1905, p.49). Legends and tales also support this contention. Moreover Rabhas were originally matrilineal like the Garos although they shifted to patriarchal set up later on with the passage of time. But till now children take the mother’s *barai*/surname following the matrilineal trait that persists with them. (Chapter III)

Relation between daughter of God, celestial bride, or otherworld bride and ordinary man is seen as natural in the folktales of both the tribes, a fact already been asserted by Max Lüthi. Lüthi also observed that folktale heroes meet and marry otherworld bride, come back, live and adjust with their normal life. In both the Rabha and the Garo tales we see hero getting married with mermaid Queen, celestial bride, daughter of God etc. Presence of celestial bride, mermaid queen in folktales reflects on the exalted position of women in folktales.

Another interesting observation is that in the Rabha tales the heavenly or celestial or otherworld bride comes down to earth to live with her ordinary husband, adjusting herself with the surrounding, doing the household chores like any other ordinary bride. Contrary to that in the Garo tales the hero goes out and stays in the wife’s place following the Garo traditional system of marriage. Being

a matrilineal tribe, the woman does not leave her parental home after marriage. It is the husband who moves in with her in her parental home which she inherits.

Stereotyped presentation of women abounds in these folktales which have been studied. We get chaste but passive and dependent women. Evil stepmothers are never absent in the tales. Chaste women are found to be powerful in the sense that they are the life-givers of their husbands. A lot of value is attached to women's chastity, honesty and loyalty. But her power is limited. She is powerful to the extent that to fight with the external world or with a formidable enemy she needs the assistance and active help from either some other human being or from animals like dogs or birds.

Another interesting thing that is observed is that women are actually powerful only when they possess magical or special power or they possess power aligned to monstrosity. As a result they are seen as evil witches or enchantresses. Society forms a negative opinion of them who dares to defy and revolt. Independent women are not accepted by the male dominant society.

Girls are given in marriage to python, cobra or frog. What is interesting is that in the Rabha tales the girls obeyed their fathers without any question and married their animal husbands. In both the Rabha tales, the daughter was given in marriage to a cobra in one, and to a frog in the other to keep their respective father's promise given to the groom. But the daughter in the Garo tale forces her parents to give in to her demand of marrying a python (although she only knew that there was a handsome man under the python's skin, a fact which she did not share with anybody till the end of the tale). This might suggest that in the matrilineal set up woman are more active and in a better position to fulfill her wishes or desire. Although both the Garo and the Rabha tales are similar, there is noticeable difference in the role played by the daughter-bride. In the Rabha tale, the daughter was passive, submissive and obliging much to the liking of the male dominated society, fulfilling patriarchal norms whereas in the Garo tale the daughter is active and assertive.

Though few in number, presence of intelligent, active and assertive women are also noticed. But it is worth mentioning here that the level of intelligence as reflected in women in folktales is of simple nature, not of highest order. In order to fulfill their desire some even acted boldly, and got wicked at times (Kancharaju Tikkaraju). But once she transgresses her traditional role and becomes a sort of rebel, society does not accept her with an open mind.

Witches and evil characters are all female and we find witches in some Rabha folktales. This is again might be a reflection of the society's perspective on women. We still find practice of witch craft and incidents of witch hunting among Rabhas in real life. But we don't encounter witches in Garo tales we have studied.

Jack Zipes said "magic of the tales can be equated to the wish – fulfillment and utopian projections of the people" (1979: 5-6). This we can see in the tales like *Tore-Tofre* where the sisters turned themselves to *ghillas* in order to get close to the men of their choice and in *Tasrairajur kahini* also evil Kancharaju Tikkaraju took the guise of the bride Tasrairaju through magic in order to marry the man she desired (Basundhar).

Another noticeable point is that where women dominate, powerful husbands are either absent or simple and henpecked and have a secondary existence in those tales. Where women are portrayed as strong in the plot of the tale, husbands are almost non-existent.

Childlessness and unhappiness related with it forms a theme in a lot of tales. Tales reflect the issue of lack of children in the life of married couple as a major cause of concern and pain. In our society children plays an important part in a married couple's life. This fact is also a reflection of the society at large. Childlessness is regretted but preference for the male child is not observed in the tales of both the tribes.

The tales do reflect on the two societies i.e. the Rabhas and Garos and comments on the pattern they follow in their societal existence. If we take into account the thematic heading under which the tales of the two tribes are classified, we find that there are commonalities and differences among women as

represented in the folktales under study. In Garo folktales we find many instances where women ventures out and go beyond their stipulated gender roles. This is absent in Rabha tales which reflects on the fact that women in matrilineal societies enjoy better standing compared to their patriarchal counterparts. Women in some of the Garo tales are found to be better placed, having a say in their future, choosing their husband, following their wish or venturing out to fulfill their dream whereas women in the Rabha tales are within the confines of patriarchal regulations appearing more like passive victims. Thus those few who try to cross the mental barrier are seen as transgressors and society does not hold a high opinion on them. The fact that women in matrilineal Garo society enjoy a better social standing is also asserted by the fact that in Garo folktales we do not find women as passive victims and witches which abounds in the Rabha folktales. Another important thing observed is that women are not given in marriage as prize or gift in Garo tales as we found in Rabha folktales, a fact which hints at comparatively better status of women in Garo society than others including the Rabhas.

But women in their normative roles are common to tales from both the tribes. Irrespective of whether they conform to patriarchal or matrilineal social structure, women in both the Rabha and Garo tales are found to be living through assigned roles given to them based on the normative behaviour. Thus in the folktales of both the tribes we find qualities like chastity, loyalty, obedience, patience, tolerance, passivity, submissiveness, purity, kindness are highly appreciated and desired in women while negative qualities like greediness, jealousy, foolishness, rivalry, falsity are also associated with them. Most importantly women and their qualities are tested in her household management. There is no doubt that in the folktales of the Garos women enjoy relative autonomy regarding their choice of life and life partner compared to women in Rabha folktales. But women are physically abused in some Garo tales to retain male supremacy which goes against the popular belief that women are better off in matrilineal set up. (Chapter IV & V)

To sum up then there are commonalities and differences among women as represented in the folktales of both the tribes. It is difficult to answer the question

whether women have better status among matrilineal Garos in comparison to the Rabhas who adhere to patriarchal social structure with a clear 'yes' or 'no'. It is found that elements of patriarchy are very much visible within matriliney, while elements of matriliney cannot be ruled out even from patriarchal societies. Although today's society is changing fast, and the gap between the men and women are receding, still somewhere a mental barrier does exist which compels women to accept second fiddle. This might be because of the traditional upbringing and the set of gender roles that is constructed at the family and societal level. There is no escaping from the pressure and expectation which is gendered and the influence of patriarchy that is deep rooted in us.



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APPENDICES

APPENDICES

APPENDIX – 1

LIST OF INFORMANTS

GARO INFORMANTS

Village-Matia Bengkanda, Goalpara(3/8/2011)

1. Mushal Marak , 56yrs.(Farmer)
2. Tingshal Marak, 49 yrs.(do)

Village- Pilingkata, Kamrup (17/2/2012)

1. Holdesh N. Sangma,68yrs.(story teller)
2. G. R.Marak,65yrs(housewife)

Village-Patarkuchi, Kamrup (28/7/2012)

1. Peruwal Momin,38yrs.(Housewife)
2. V. Momin,65yrs.(do)
3. Bistini Changma,42yrs.(do)

Village-Ranibari, Kamrup (8/9/10)

1. Julius N.Sangma,65yrs.(retired serviceman)
2. Tangsil Marak,62yrs.(housewife)

Village-Bare Gaon, Kamrup (13/8/2011)

1. Paulina Marak, 63 yrs(retired school teacher)
2. Chandana N. Sangma, 48 yrs.(housewife)

Village- Kalapani, Maligaon, Kamrup (20/8/2012)

1. B.C.Sangma, 50 yrs.(serviceman)
2. Aprilia Marak, 42 yrs.(housewife)

Village- Santipara, Kamrup (25/12/2011)

1. Franklin N. Sangma,58(ex-Navy)
2. Jimison R. Marak,65(retired school teacher)
3. Labendra N.Sangma,73(Ex-Deacon, Santipara Baptist Church)
4. Brehosh G. Sangma,69(Ex-Pastor, do)
5. Snehalata Sangma,(Retired Nurse and Deacon)
6. Adward S. Sangma,40,(Assistant Prof., Gobardhan, Chaygaon)
7. Sikha Sangma,35(research scholar, GU)

LIST OF RABHA INFORMANTS

Village-Bardamal,(Rangdania) Goalpara (25/7/2011)

1. Nital Ch. Rabha,64(retired serviceman)
2. Pankaj Rabha,25(assistant prof.)
3. Nirupriya Rabha(housewife)
4. Khadeng Rabha,60
5. Karab Ch. Rabha,75(storyteller and village headman)
6. Renuka Rabha,54(advisor,Mechpara Purbanchal Rabha Mahila Samiti)
7. Kabita Rabha,19(story teller)
8. Jasomati Rabha,60
9. Saitendra Ch. Rabha,61(school teacher)
10. Puwani Rabha,35

Village-Dariduri(Maitori), Goalpara (26/7/2011)

1. Jogen Rabha,73

Village-Makri(Maitori), Goalpara (26/7/2011)

1. Kamakhya Rabha, 42

Village-Hirapara(Pati Rabha), Goalpara (27/7/2011)

1. Jeuti Rabha,48
2. Niyati Rabha,35

Village-Malank Kana(Pati Rabha), Goalpara (27/7/2011)

1. Rebati Rabha,42
2. Lalita Rabha,45

Village-Rabha Para,(Pati Rabha) Dhupdhara, Goalpara (27/7/2011)

1. Debi rabha,49

Village-Manikpur,(Pati Rabha) Loharghat, Kamrup (12/7/2012)

1. Bhubin Rabha, 68 (retired teacher anr Story teller)
2. Bhusan Rabha, 35 (Businessman)

APPENDIX – 2
PHOTOGRAPHS



Rabha women doing their household work



with Nital Ch. Rabha



...with story teller Karab Chandra Rabha



...the young teller Kabita Rabha



....with story teller Bhubin Rabha



In a Rabha Village talking informally



a Rabha household...



A Garo Granary



Bamboo-made baskets used in Garo household



In a Garo village on Christmas



Holdesh N. Sangma ...the story teller



Talking with Garo Women



A Garo woman busy in her routine duty