

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the present study. It includes the formulation of research problem, survey of related literatures, research questions, data and methodology, chapterisation etc. These are discussed below.

THE PROBLEM

It is the established fact that in the fast growing society, despite many changes, women are always taken as secondary to men. Contributions of women in all round development of the society particularly in the developing and underdeveloped countries are intentionally underestimated and hence mostly unrecognised. India is a developing country with its rich cultural heritage. However, Indian women don't enjoy equal status along with their male counterpart. Nonetheless, womenfolk all over the world are facing problems. Though, women occupy almost half of the total global population, they are trailing far behind their male counterparts in economic, political, social and other sectors in society. According to a UNO report, women perform 67 per cent of the world's working hours and earn only 10 per cent of the world's income. It sharply indicates about the lower status of women (Desai and Thakkar, 2011). The feminist theorists opine that woman appears to be a free and autonomous being like all human creatures. Nevertheless, she finds herself with restricted identity; she is directly or indirectly depending on male members of her family (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949). Radical feminists aim to challenge and overthrow patriarchy, which establishes male supremacy in the society and calls for radical reordering of society. Marxists believe that female subordination is a result of the emergence of private property, in particular the private ownership of the forces of the production (Haralambas and Heald, 1980). Male domination over private property is also a major cause for women's oppression. The existentialists visualize the cultural and political status of women. Woman is differentiated with

reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental. He is the subject; he is the absolute-she is the other. Women therefore find themselves living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other and thus women are caught in a perpetual dilemma (Chattarjee, 2004).

The term 'status' refers to a position in a social system with distinct array of designated rights and obligations (Merton, 1968). The people of higher status generally occupy better position in a social setting. In other words, it can be said that status is a key component of a social setting. Linton (1936) is of the view that status is primarily a position in a social structure involving rights, duties and reciprocal expectations of behaviour, none of which depends upon the personal characteristic of the status occupants. Thus, status may be determined in terms of norms and taboos governing people's roles and behaviour in a particular community (Chauhan, 1999). Social position or status of a person varies from place to place because it depends upon various factors like education, decision making capacity, customs, rights, duties etc. Status is reflected in relationship of a person to other one and vice versa. Rights, duties, liberty, liabilities, disabilities, and restrictions imposed on women in any society or civilisation which always determines their status in the respective society or civilisation. Lowie (1920) has suggested four determinants of the status of woman viz., (1) treatment of women in society, (2) women's legal status, (3) opportunities available to her public activities and (4) patterns of her labour participation. Obviously, the status of women is a relative term that varies in its meaning from society to society, community to community and individual to individual.

Indian society has a rich and strong cultural background in which the women usually enjoy the position of high status but practically, it is not so. If we look at the history, then it appears that ancient India, particularly pre Vedic Indian society was male dominated. During this period, females were obliged to perform duties according to the rules and regulations prepared by men. Each and every sphere of women's life was dominated by men. Womenfolk were assigned little work like preparation of place of worship, cleaning of utensils and other

secondary activities in the rituals. Vedic period brought certain change in the life of Indian women. During this period, Indian women had higher esteem and thus they enjoyed more admirable position. Some women of Vedic period who were more intellectual with having more knowledge about every sphere of life were found throughout the nation and they took active part in various religious, political and educational events. Women were idealized as Devi or Goddesses in this period (Khari, 2009). The traditional Indian culture holds the view that women always preserve the power of Goddess which they share with the society. 'Kumari puja' in Bengal and other parts of India and also in Nepal where a small girl before attaining puberty is being worshipped with Devi Durga in every year, signifies the prestigious traditional status of Indian women. People were encouraged to worship Goddess along with God and in some cases worship of Goddess got more importance. Later Jainism and Buddhism also gave equal importance to Goddess in their traditional form of worship. In Vedic period any type of discrimination on the basis of sex was challenged by both men and women intellectuals. Women were given equal opportunity in all respect along with men; co-education was also prevalent. Both pre-puberty and post-puberty marriages of girls were allowed in those days. Women were recognised as virtual head of a family while men were busy with outside and economic activities like agriculture, hunting, trading etc. Women had to perform various important roles in almost all ritual worship in temple which brought them inseparable part of all routine rituals inside temple. Mythology also offered great honour to them. But in course of time during post-Vedic period, this sacred character of mythology had lost by priests and other powerful people especially from upper caste category and ultimately degraded to sex exploitation. As a result, this religious custom recorded as the most heinous practice in the history of rich Indian culture, which degraded the status of women at the lowest level. However, in contemporary democratic India this abused system is illegal now. Besides, like Devadasi, few inhuman customs for women like 'Sati custom', restrictions imposed on widows, child marriage, etc. also degraded the status of women particularly in post-Vedic era. These practices were found mostly in the warrior

tribes of India because Indian states were often attacked by foreign invaders and there women always became soft target for the invaders. So, to divert attention from women, some rude and inhuman customs were imposed to the women, which created reverse impact for all round development of women in India in post-Vedic period. But India had her own feminine culture and tradition which helped them to overcome those heinous situations (Choudhury, 1993).

“The groups of people which have marginal degree of contact with other culture or people and are isolated as well as use natural resources in accordance with modern equipment are identified as aboriginal inhabitants of our nation and are called Adibasi, Vanavasi, Janajati or Tribe. Such a group has common ancestor, custom and tradition, culture, language distinctly their own customary law which determines their way of living and these people are always in the close proximity to forest territories. According to Census 2011, tribal population in India constituted 8.20% of its total population. After Africa, India has the largest concentration of tribal population. In India near about 450 tribal communities are found and each of them has its own ethnic identity (Desai and Thakkar, 2011). It is believed that Indian tribal women have an elevated, elated and respectable social status compared to the non-tribal women in India. But this prevalent perception regarding tribal women is far away from truth (Chaudhary, 2011). There is a gap between impression and the facts, and the gap is also (mostly) in static mode everywhere and every area of differences and which also indirectly favours discrimination. The impression towards the tribal women’s status always creates some adverse effects in the field of policy decision and their effective implementation by the concerned authorities. As a result, from the human development point of view, today status of women is far inferior to their male counterparts and this has also affected the overall position of Scheduled Tribe population, in general, in India and its provinces. And this always results in a lopsided planning for the development of the deprived communities, in general, and their womenfolk in particular. The overall conditions of tribal population are not same in every state or districts of India. Comparatively, tribal people living in the tribal dominated states of North-eastern region like Mizoram, Meghalaya,

Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh etc. are getting better facilities than the other. As Assam is not a tribal dominated state, but 29 numbers of tribal groups inhabit various districts of Assam (www.nic.in/content accessed on 27.09.2016 at 7.09 AM). In this state, Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar etc are tribal dominated districts and hence the tribal people availing all basic requirements like the other people. However, in Cachar district various tribal groups like, Dimasa, Hmar, Khasia, Pnar, Naga, Kuki, Karbi etc. inhabiting since long. Tribal people are found in all 15 development blocks of Cachar district. But most of these groups inhabit in remotest areas of the district. Maximum Karbi and Kuki villages are also located in remote areas and hence most of these villages are underdeveloped with the least basic facilities and very poor communication. But despite of having least basic facilities in the habitation, the status of the womenfolk are not same among the two communities.

So, in order to examine the overall status of Karbi and Kuki women it is necessary to understand the various parameters related to the status. Along with other parameter, the level of work participation of women and their decision making roles in the family always reflects the actual status of the women in any society.

SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

The unique lifestyle of womenfolk of tribal communities attracts the attention of the sociologists, social anthropologists and others. As a result, huge numbers of studies have focused on different aspects of the life of tribal women. Here some of them are highlighted.

Grigson (1938) who studied the Maria Gonds of Baster district in Madhya-Pradesh found that women enjoyed more power in almost all familial affairs. A Maria Gond girl has enough liberty to select her life partner and also to leave him for any kind of unwanted treatment at any time from her husband or his family.

Bordoloi (1977) studied the Hajong, an ethnic group of Assam, and revealed that Hajong tribe follows patrilineal structure of family, where father is the only decision maker, other family members including mother have no right to decide any family affair.

Sharma Thakur's article "Social Status of Karbi Women" (1992) report that both Karbi men and women enjoy equal status, although in certain specific traditional matters Karbi women are not allowed to participate. After marriage a woman continuously uses the surname (title) of her father whereas children use the surname of their father. In Karbi community no women exaggerates her anguish, though she is deprived in familial affairs. He also viewed that for the sake of maintaining peace and harmony in family, women sacrifice many events in their day-to-day life.

Bhattacharjee (1992) in his work on "The Dimasa Female Clans and Some Problems" revealed the fact that Dimasa women have more or less equal status with men. After marriage, a man always consults his wife for doing various activities. He also observed that both patri-matrilineal social systems exist in Dimasa society. But in religious practices women were not allowed to become priests or diviners.

Gangte (1993) in his book titled *The Kukis of Manipur* mentions that social system establishes only man's status in the Kuki community in Manipur. He observes that despite the fact of participating in all cultural, social, economic activities along with men, a Kuki woman cannot attain higher status in the society. Traditional Kuki social system distributes certain prestigious norms among males such as mother's brother, sister's brother etc. to perform various social ceremonies.

Chakraborty (1993) in his article on "Customary Laws and the Status of Tribal Women in Tripura" highlighted the gender discrimination in unmodified customary law for tribal women in Tripura. He specifically pointed out the area

of discrimination and suggested for proper modification as well as legal codification of customary laws so that the womenfolk could get justice.

Choudhary (1993) discussed about the lower status of women particularly in Jamatia tribe of Tripura in his article on “Sati in the Tribal Societies of Tripura” and he indicated the existence of Sati among Jamatia tribe.

Mann (1996) in her book on *Tribal Women* threw light on the rights and duties of women in various tribal communities. In her study she found that women of Kinnaure tribe enjoy decision making power at home but they cannot become priests to appease deity. Traditional council of Kinnaures imparts justice and maintains social control in the society; however, it does not allow a woman to become its member under any circumstances. She also finds that in a family, the eldest brother inherits all property and therefore polyandry is very much popular in this tribe. All brothers in a family marry a girl of about twelve years of age and the eldest brother becomes the social father of all children. Girl’s early marriage is still in vogue in Kinnaure society.

Das (1996) in his book on *Tribal Development and Socio-Cultural Matrix* elaborately discussed tribal cultures, particularly the tribal communities of north-eastern states with special reference to Assam. Area-wise investigation of their social, cultural, political and economic aspects depicts neatly the roles and functions of tribal women and their social position in each area of respective tribal community.

Sonowal (1996) had studied the Sonowal-Kachari, a plain tribe of Assam, viewed that male supremacy is very common, and the dominating behaviour of male member is legitimated through various social norms in this tribal community.

Deori (2002) portrayed status of Deori women in his book on *Religious Practices of Deoris*. In the study he mentioned that women of Deori tribe enjoys

equal status to that of men, and in absence of the male head of the family, the senior-most woman becomes the authority.

Kikon's (2002) reveals the sociological background of Naga women in Nagaland. In her work she observed that Naga society is completely biased towards its male members. Humiliation, insult, and harassment of women by men, even by close relatives, are part of social interaction which compels women to consider themselves as inferior to men.

Rao (2005) in his study on "Socio-economic Status of Tribal Women" reviewed various government programmes for the development of tribal women in Arunachal Pradesh. He raised questions about the attitude of tribal men in the state and suggested that they should appreciate the contribution of women in the household and other economic activities for maintaining healthy atmosphere in the family.

Phadke (2008) in his book on *Women's Status in North-Eastern India* portrays the status of tribal women in Tripura. Tribal women of Tripura take active role in all cultural activities, which reflects their traditional folk culture. Though they play important role in the family and society, yet women cannot act as priest in Hindu religious festivals and in Baptist or other Christian churches.

Karna (2008) while discussing about the violence generally occurred against the women of Meghalayan tribe particularly belonging to matrilineal society found that few internal factors were responsible for such violence. Property was found the main underlying factor for which cases were often heard where they were subjected to physical and mental torture. Due to a biased opinion against women in tribal community, women were even declared witches by the family members and the society, which leads to committing physical and mental torture. He also viewed that due to the age-old beliefs, attitudes and mind-set of tribal community towards its womenfolk, the most popular government-aided programmes like Panchayati Raj have failed to improve the socio-economic status of tribal women in Meghalaya.

Dewan (2011) who studied the Gaddi Tribe of Himachal Pradesh mainly focused on traditional laws of Gaddi tribe. He says that Gaddi women always have participatory involvement in almost all economic activities but they have no decision making power in the family according to their traditional law.

Dutta (2011) in his paper on *Disempowered Gender: Status of Women in North-East India* reported the position of women in the family and society of North-East India. He found that customary laws put tribal women of North-Eastern states in a very disadvantageous position.

Baroah (2011) conducted a study on women's rights in tribal areas of North-East India. Along with other tribes she critically analysed the position of Karbi women in the light of customary laws and inheritance rights. He emphasized that due to customary laws like other tribal women, Karbi women have also fallen in disadvantageous position in the family and in society as well.

Agnihotri (2001) in her study observed that due to gender bias in Naga society, history sidelined the role of Naga women in Naga movements. Throughout her study she also pointed out that due to invisibility of their role in various movements, women generally maintain distance from politics which affects their socio-economic status in the society.

Mehrotra (2006) in her article on *Situating Tribal Women* discusses about the tribal women's marginal participation in the mainstream political life in India and thereby their marginalization due to various restrictions imposed by their societies. She also mentioned that among various tribal groups of Northeast India women are encouraged to obey the gender roles whereas men are encouraged to learn leadership qualities.

Hemalatha (2009) reported the passive participation of tribal women members of Mysore Taluk Gaon Panchayat in its various meetings. He pointed out that it was one of the major reasons behind their status degradation.

Kumar (2010) in his work on *Tribal Women in Local Governance- A Study of Andhra Pradesh in India* found that the tribal women's participation in voting, attending meetings, decision making, formulating plans as well as performance in Panchayat Raj were not satisfactory.

Ruivah (1993) in his book on *Social Changes among Nagas (Tangkhul)* discussed the family system of the Tangkhul, one of the Naga Tribes, in Manipur. In this tribe, the eldest son of the family becomes the owner of the house and the only custodian of the paternal property. Hence, the remaining sons and daughters have to leave the house after their marriage.

Chauhan (1999) in her book on *Tribal Women: Continuity and Change* showed how women of Saharia tribe from Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh have been deprived of multiple forest resources whereas the state has various rules and regulations to extend welfare schemes for them. As women of the tribe are kept away from various economic benefits, the study provides several reports on tribal women which raised so many questions on the economy, polity and culture of the tribes in interaction with other dominating forces of the country.

Doley (1998) in a paper on *Role and Status of Women in Mising Society* said that in spite of contributing more to the family than their male counterparts, Missing women cannot claim any property from father or husband and also they have the least role in decision-making process of the family.

Fernandes and Bharali (2008) found that even after adopting Christianity, status of tribal women practically did not change. The matrilineal tribal communities of Meghalaya like Garo, Khasia and Jaintia leave no social right for their womenfolk. Hence, women don't enjoy any role in land distribution, village council and other decision making bodies.

Fernandes and Parera (2005) had discussed how gender bias evolved in Dimasa tribal community of Assam in the issues relating to the CPRs (Common Property Resources). Chief hirer should be always a male for getting individual

'pattas' in CPRs of Dima Hasao district. Also, in the process of distribution such 'pattas' women were not allowed to participate and, hence, women were totally excluded from these.

Roy (2001) in her article on *Economic Empowerment and Tribal Women in India* discussed the effect of modernization on tribal women of Orissa. She found that women were encouraged to grow various nutritious vegetables and fruits in their kitchen gardens and sell the surplus in the *hat*, the weekly village market, for earning.

Behal (2002) who discussed the social and economic status of tribal women in various tribal communities of Assam; viz., Karbi, Bodo, Kachari etc., depicted a short history of their status and present-day realities. She studied the involvement of tribal women in group as well as individual activities related to economy and found that in spite of sincere involvement, lack of documentation, legal literacy, and awareness of one's legal right, most of women groups of these tribal communities have no decision-making power in local governance.

Khonglah (2002) in her study on *Khasi Women and Indigenous Questions* portrayed the present status of Khasi women in the social and political fields. In the study she ascertained that traditionally Khasi women enjoyed the inheritance right and the youngest daughter of the family became the custodian. But without the consent of male member of the family she could do nothing with the property. She demolished certain myths and preconceived notions about Khasi women. Women of this tribe are also not even allowed to participate in any decision-making activity in the familial affairs.

Lodha (2003) while working on the daily activities of tribal women relating to directly or indirectly to the family income found that the direct individual income of tribal women is important determining factor of their social status in most of the tribal communities in northeast India.

Gurulingiah (2005) who studied the relationship between self-help group and women empowerment in tribal community has mentioned about various governmental programmes regarding the role of NGOs for the development of socio economic condition of tribal women of Kadu Gollas, a nomadic tribe in Karnataka. Social customs related to women's biological maturity force them to be isolated from the society during menstruation, child birth etc. He suggested that the training and awareness programmes are required for the tribal women for their overall development.

Rao (2005) studied the socio-economic status of tribal women in five districts of Arunachal Pradesh; viz., Lohit, Dibang Valley, Upper Siang, Lower Subansiri and West Kameng and found that women from major tribes of Mongolian descent suffer from heavy workload and poor participation in decision-making process in the state.

Aggarwal (2005) conducted a study on Banchhra tribe of Madhya Pradesh and finds that birth of a girl child in any Banchhra family is highly celebrated because a girl can be pushed to prostitution at any time for earning of the family. Poverty is the main cause for such tendency among the parents.

Thakur and Thakur (2009) critically analysed the property rights and status of women of Nirula tribe in Nilgiris. Nirula girls are made skilful by imparting training inside and outside home since childhood for becoming good daughters. He emphasizes that women's remarkable contribution to economic development of the family fails to provide them both property rights and social status in the society.

Borman (2011) in his paper on *Tribal Co-operative System* tried to examine the economic status as well as the tribal co-operative system of Assam. He said that education might bring change in the status of women. He also said that the tribal co-operative system may bring a massive change in their economy and life style as well.

Burman and Fernandes (2002) observed that Dimasa women always believed to make all household marketing by men only, because women were found to have less external exposure than men in the commercial world and market economy. In Dima Hasao district of Assam, domination of men in the market was obvious. Dimasa women were found to be selling agricultural products, whereas manufactured goods were completely controlled by men. Hence, Dimasa women failed to initiate any control over the economy. When community ownership of land in Dima Hasao district was prevailing, the status of tribal women was slightly better but at the eve of introduction of individual ownership of land, the status of Dimasa women has started declining.

Pandey (2011) in her paper on *Socio-economic Status of Tribal Women in Transhumant Gaddi population of Bharmour, Himachal Pradesh* found that men dominated community and the family. But at the same time women have also greater say in family life and hold great social freedom. She also observed that ecological and environmental factors have given Gaddi women a special economic power and social status at par with men.

Desai and Thakkar (2011) while talking about *Women in Indian Society* have discussed how the tribal women migrate to urban areas and engage themselves in the unorganised sector such as construction, housekeeping, fruits and vegetable selling etc. They opined that without depending upon agriculture, hunting of animals and other traditional economic activities may open doors for the tribal women and help to attain new economic status gradually.

Talwar (2007) in his study on “Women Education, Employment and Gender Discrimination in Tribal Community of Hyderabad-Karnataka Regions” found that the factors like male superiority complex and male ownership of private property are responsible for gender discrimination among the tribal communities of these regions.

Das (2012) who in her book on *Tribal Women of Assam* discussed demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the tribal women in Assam

and found that the attitude of the tribal people of Assam towards social change is quite different from the plain population and thus lagging behind. And this is the reason why social change among them is still very slow. Low female literacy rate in tribal community is mainly responsible for such condition. For Karbi women in particular she mentioned that after the death of father, daughters are given no share from their paternal property.

Ghosal (1979) in his work on *Spatial Perspective on Literacy in India* mentioned that low literacy rate among tribal women in Assam has resulted in the cumulative disparity of women in economic and social sectors of the respective community.

Marak (2001) in her work on *Matriliny and Education among Garos* discussed the changing attitude of educated Garo people towards matrilineal system of their society. Traditionally Garo tribe follows female line. But in general a woman in a Garo family is always under control of her husband who has the right to ignore any wish of his wife as any patrilineal society does.

Bhasin (2007) in her study on *Status of Tribal Women in India* emphasized that formal education of tribal women is one of the major parameter for determination of their status. She studied the tribal women in Laddakh, North Sikkim, Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh and Udaipur district of Rajasthan and found that those women who completed primary education have achieved relatively higher status than illiterate ones.

Basu (1967) had conducted a study for the health status of tribal women of Irular tribe of Tamil Nadu. In the study he found that the net reproductive index which was also an indicator for their fertility is 1.31. He also observed that the child mortality rate according to the age of child was highest in the first year.

Das (1979) from his elaborate study of Santhal tribe of Orissa found that modern medical facilities were out of reach in the community. Santhal women were the worst sufferers than their menfolk. Black magic and witchcraft practices

and human sacrifice were very common among the santhal tribal community of Orissa. In most of the cases women remained the target and committed severe punishment for invisible crime without offering any medical support to the suffering women.

Dutta (1979) also conducted a study in the Kora tribe of Mednipur in West Bengal regarding the health status of women. She reported that the total alive children in the fertility period of a Kora woman was 3.3 whereas Crude Birth Rate was 41.81 per thousand population and total fertility rate was 4.42. It is also found that these results were more than the national average in both the categories.

Ghosal (1979) studied the Kota tribe of Nilgiri Hills, Madras Tamil Nadu and observed that in the age of 40 years or more, the average number of children of a woman was 3.71. He further noticed that frequency of mortality before the reproductive age i.e., 15 years was 30.8%. This also revealed the high mortality and fertility rates in the tribal community of Tamil Nadu.

Murty (1987) studied the Solige tribe of Karnataka to investigate the fertility behaviour of their womenfolk. It was found that the Crude Birth Rate (CBR), Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and General Fertility Rate (GFR) always remained higher in comparison of the general population of Karnataka. The age at marriage was found the main cause for these results. The average family size of a Solige family was 5.64 and the average age at marriage was 14.2 years.

Raut (1979) also claimed that in various tribal pockets of Orissa, Santhal women were often punished due to imaginary and baseless criminal offence. He cited various practical incidents that happened in Mayurbhanj, Kunjakacha etc, where Santhal women were even sentenced to death by the male relatives with the indulgence of the society.

Basu and Kshtraya (1989) observed that in Muriya, Mariya, Bhatras and Halba tribes from Baster district of Madhya Pradesh, women had high fertility

and mortality rate than the non-tribes. So, women were proud of their child bearing capacity and their children became the assets of the family who could work at a very early age. Hence, specially married women had a great social value in the family structure due to their motherhood.

While studying the Kuttiya tribe of Phulbani district of Orissa, Basu and Jindal (1990) observed that, the pregnant women had to take all initiatives for delivery of a new baby. At the time of delivery the pregnant woman kept herself in half squatting position holding a rope tied from the roof of the hut. This half squatting position helps her to generate pressure so that the child might be brought out smoothly. The pregnancy with simple or no complication could be done by this cruel traditional method. But in the case of complicated labour, it might lead to mortality of either one or both. The same type of traditional delivery was done in other tribal communities like Santhals, Gonds, Khariars etc. They further evaluated the following various indicators of Kuttiya Konds tribe: (i) average age of menarche was 14.5 years, (ii) average number of pregnancies, per mother completed reproductive cycles – 5.09, (iii) average number of pregnancies per mother in incomplete reproductive cycles- 3.89, (iv) Infant Mortality Rate – 179.75 per thousand populations and (v) Total Fertility Rate – 5 birth per woman during the entire span of reproductive period.

Culshaw (2004) observed that in Santhal community of Orissa, women were culturally isolated and as a result women were excluded from any rituals of the society. Hence, various myths developed in the mind of menfolk which injected slow poisoning in the society and witchcraft practices were the by-product of these attitudes.

Teron, Terangpi, and Phangchopi (2011) studied the traditional practices performed by Kuki women, including health care. They found that most critical medical treatments like pregnancy, child birth etc among the Karbis of Assam are performed with their indigenous knowledge.

Mazumdar (2013), correspondent of We News reported that in spite of eligibility for getting free and special health care, tribal women of Barwani district of Madhya Pradesh are still dying during pregnancy due to the negligence of health officials. In her report she mentioned that in this district, 21 maternal deaths were registered since April 2010 to November 2010.

Santhosam and Samuel (2013) conducted a study on health status of Irular tribal women in Kancheepuram district, Tamil-Nadu. She observed that Irular community is highly disease-prone and existence of various socio-political factors and inhuman attitude of health officials restrict them from getting basic health facilities. She also mentioned that poverty, illiteracy, ignorance about causes of diseases, underdeveloped communication, hostile environment and many other factors compounded the problems of this tribal community in general and tribal women in particular.

While searching customary law of Ao Naga tribe, Mills and Smith (1926) entered into the subject of divorce and role of customary law, and found that once divorce was very common in that society. After converted into Christianity in the period of World War II, the Church never allowed to divorce very easily and smoothly. Hence, the trend of divorce started decreasing day-by-day in spite of having provisions of divorce in the customary law of Ao Naga community. According to customary law of this community, adultery, desertion, and cruelty are the serious offence for which wife can seek divorce. Even if husband commits adultery to his issueless wife due to impotency, then the wife also can seek divorce from her husband. In this type of cases, all properties except land of husband are equally divided between husband and his issueless wife. But if there are children and committed divorce, then the husband will get no share from his paternal property, whereas the divorced wife get the share with one and only condition that the divorced lady should not get remarried. But if she gets married again, then village assembly might take action against the new husband by taking fine.

In the light of customary law and inheritance of paternal property, Goswami (2015) in his study on Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland observed that men always inherit the paternal property. But a widow, used to receive a portion of rice and maximum a house from her husband's land and she might be allowed to stay there till her death. After death, the said property would be distributed among the male heirs. But in case the private property, i.e., the property earned from her father might be sold or distributed to her daughters and sons according to her wish. The author also observed in the study that Ao Naga society is not against divorce. In case of divorce, some criteria in favour of seeking divorce are always there in the customary law. Wife can seek divorce on the ground of sodomy and rape, whereas husband can divorce his wife on the ground of barrenness. But if the divorce done by husband, then he has to make necessary arrangement for his ex-wife so that she should not be burden to any one in any circumstance.

Banerjee and Khaperde (2015) while working on the women of Bhil tribe in urban setting found that migrated Bhil women in Indore from various neighbouring areas lived with tremendous problem in the urban setting. To sustain their livelihood, Bhil people had to settle down in very congested and marginal slum areas, which had created several unwanted problems in to their day to day life. They were also facing lack of privacy in toilet and sanitation and ultimately they have to do toilet in public places. Womenfolk of this tribe had bound to invite several urinary diseases.

Sharma Thakur (1985) conducted a study on Tiwas living both in plains and hill areas of Assam. The plain Tiwas are patrilineal in nature where daughters do not inherit property. But the hill Tiwas are still matrilineal and daughters inherit property from their mothers.

Barbara and Farnandes (2002), while studying the Dimasa tribe, observed that Dimasa society was patrilineal. Hence, according to the Dimasa customary law only son could inherit paternal property and in case of maternal property, i.e.,

jewellery, clothes, looms and accessories, daughter were found to have the share. The son in any circumstance could not even claim any share of these properties. If there were no daughter in the family, then the daughter of nearest and loving relatives could get these. But in case of common properties, i.e., cooking utensils etc were inherited by son and daughter equally.

Parwez (2009) mentioned in the research paper that Karbi tribe follows the patrilineal social system. According to the Karbi customary law, all sons inherit the father's land but the eldest one have always the larger share. The remaining of the share is distributed equally among the other sons only, whereas there is no provision for daughter's share in the paternal land. But a widow can retain the husband's property. But if she gets remarried, then she would be disqualified from getting any share from husband's paternal property.

Roy Barman (2015) in the study of inheritance of paternal property condemned the abstract assumption by citing the practical examples of traditional belief and practices among tribes of North-eastern region of India. He uncovered the fact of Naga-tribe, where patriliney and patriarchy were ominously prevalent. In the Naga, the dominant tribal group of Nagaland the descent of any person, male or female is always identified through father's lineage. All movable properties were inherited by the male folk by the law of rule. But few exceptional cases were also found in Aao Naga tribe of Nagaland. In this tribe when a person wishes to give a share of his landed property to his daughter, then he can do this with some preconditions like (i) the land should not be achieved through clan or as ancestral property, rather the property should be acquired by that person, (ii) property usually located outside of the home land of the person, (iii) can give the property only during his life time, (iv) the daughter will have to make a token payment to her father to seal the deal. After getting the property from the father she can dispose of this according to her wishes, even she can distribute the property equally to her children.

Roy Burman also observed that birth of a male child was considered auspicious. In Ao Naga community, young boys and girls are separately trained in dormitories. Young boys' dormitories are called *Morung* or *Ariju* and that of young girls are called *Tsuki*. Young dormitories are generally made in order to socialise the young members of the society. *Morung* are usually functioned as guardhouse to defend the village and recreation centers, which also deployed as planning house where future plans of the village were designed. On the other hand *Tsuki*, the girls' dormitory is used as a socio-cultural training institute where girls are usually cultured to believe that they were borne to look after the family and houses. In *Tsuki*, girls are getting training of all household activities like cooking, washing, collecting of firewood, child carrying, kitchen gardening, caring of sick person at home etc.

Longkumar (2009), while discussing about the control of property and children of Naga tribe, observed that Naga women were neither allowed to participate nor to enter the community hall during the meeting of the village level highest decision making body called 'The Village Council'. The Naga men have complete control over the property right and children. They cannot inherit any property from either father or from husband. Rather he observed that Naga society and the clansmen often offer charity to the women who were in trouble instead of giving property right. He also observed that Village Council was the highest decision making body and which determines the rates of wage for maintaining the uniformity in the business of the locally produced goods. Like other tribal communities of North-eastern region, womenfolk of Naga tribe also do equal work with their menfolk in all economic activities but they have no right to participate in the meetings of highest decision making body.

Singh (1994) highlighted the issues of Baiga women of Madhya Pradesh. A Baiga woman does not inherit any share of their paternal property but she can only enjoy her husband's property if she don't remarry after the death of her husband.

Sachidananda and Mandal (1985) also found the same tradition in the case of Pando and some other tribes of Bihar. A widow can enjoy rights over the property of her deceased husband, but she neither sells/mortgage nor can resist the male members of the family from doing this. As a result, women are not generally entertained by the bankers for issuing loan.

Saikia (1993) in his paper on *The Rabhas: A Peep into Their Acculturation* unfolded the fact that Rabha society initially practiced matrilineal type of society but gradually they are adopting the patrilineal culture. As a result, Rabha community is becoming male dominated and thus women are being deprived of any share of their paternal property.

In brief, it may be said that these studies have examined the rights, duties, privileges, religious obligations, work participation, property rights, participation in decision making, educational level and health security among the tribal people as well as their womenfolk. However, not many of them bring out a situation of the tribes and their women as found in the Cachar district. Here, the tribes including their women have a long history of contact with non-tribes and acculturation, but the contacts and changes haven't benefited much to the women. Therefore, the present research has attempted to make a systematic account of the rights, obligations, privileges, expectations, security conditions of women of the Karbi and Kuki tribes in the district.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To know the decision making power of Karbi and Kuki women in their families
- ii. To understand the economic status of Karbi and Kuki women
- iii. To find out the political status of Karbi and Kuki women

- iv. To examine the health status of Karbi and Kuki women
- v. To examine the educational and communication status of Karbi and Kuki women

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

- i) Do Karbi and Kuki women have decision making power in their families?
- ii) Do the Karbi and Kuki women inherit their parental property?
- iii) Is the educational status of Karbi and Kuki men and women in Cachar district is equal?
- iv) Does gender discrimination prevail in the customary laws of Karbi and Kuki tribes?

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

(i) Sources and Types of Data

The study utilised both types of data– primary and secondary. The primary data were collected from the field and adult respondents with the age group 14 and above through structured interview schedule and also through observations. Secondary data collected from various sources like books, newspaper, journals and articles, respective Non-Government Organization, published and unpublished research articles etc.

(ii) Universe and Units of the Study

All Karbi and all Kuki villages of Cachar district constituted the universe and every household was treated as unit of the study for data collection as most of the Karbi and Kuki villages are located on hills locally known as *Punjees* wherein number of households is very less. Therefore, no sample of households was drawn for the study.

Cachar district is situated in the southern part of Assam and Silchar town houses the district headquarters. The district has two sub-divisions (Silchar and Lakhipur) and fifteen development blocks. Bengali is the official language as majority people's mother tongue is Bengali. Apart from Bengali, Manipuri, Dimasa, Rongmai Naga, Khasia, Hmar, Mizo, Karbi, Kuki are also living in this district. Karbies mainly inhabit in 13 villages in Kalain and Borkhola development blocks and Kukis inhabit 17 villages in Udharband, Rajabazar, Lakhipur, Binnakhandi, and Borjalenga development block.

(iii) Selection of the Units

As every Karbi and Kuki houses were treated as unit for data collection, 513 households were available in the study area of 30 Karbi and Kuki Punjees. Of these, 11 households had no female members. Thus, data were collected from 502 households comprising 284 Karbi and 218 Kuki. The respondents, one each were selected from womenfolk having 14 and above years of age. In both the communities, it is observed that a girl of 14 years of age is considered as minimum age for getting married. Hence for data collection female having 14 and more years of age (one from each houses), according to the availability were selected as the units of the study by convenience sampling method.

(iv) Tools for Data collection

The primary data were collected from the field through structured interview schedule, informal discussion and also through observation method during field visit.

(v) Operational Definitions

Status: Social position or relative importance of a person or a group in a social setting with a distinct array of designated rights and obligations.

Tribe: Generally, people or group of people who are primitive in nature living in natural and unpolluted atmosphere far away from the civilisation with their

norms, values, customs and belief. “A tribe is a collection of group of families bearing a common name, member of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well-assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations” (D N Mazumdar, 1950). In the present study, two groups Karbi and Kuki located in the Cachar district, scheduled / listed in the Indian Constitution as the ‘scheduled tribe’ is a tribe.

In this study the term ‘tribe’ refers to the Karbi and Kuki communities.

Karbi – A major hill tribe of Assam inhabited mainly in Karbi Anglong district. They are racially belonging to Mongoloid group and linguistically Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto- Burman family. Formerly, in Assam they were called Mikir. The study refers to the Karbi in Cachar district of Assam.

Kuki – Kuki is a generic term for a number of mixed groups of tribal people who have migrated in India through Burma (Myanmar) from central Asia. In Burma they are called Chin and in India they are known as Kuki. Kuki people belong to Tibeto-Burman-Jewish community. The study refers to the Kuki villages in Cachar district.

Punjee – A cluster of tribal families, located in hills is called punjee (village). Here, it refers to the Karbi and Kuki villages in Cachar district.

Customary Law - Customary law is a set of unwritten rules that a society observes continuously and uniformly for a long time.

(v) **Theoretical Perspective**

In social sciences status of women has been perceived structural, Marxist and feminist stand points. This study uses structural perspective of understanding and analysis of the status of women in Karbi and Kuki tribes. As one finds no classes or class conflict which Marxist perspective uses for analysis as well as presence of feminist ideology and thought in the two tribes and their women,

neither Marxist nor feminist perspective is applicable to the study of these women. These tribal societies have simple social structures consisting of the totality of their social, economic, political, religious and cultural relationships. Hence, their societies evince social structures having social consensus in Parsonian sense, rather than regular conflicts and ideological differences between people or between men and women. Therefore, in their case, network of statuses constitute social structure and if social status of any category of people is analysed it gives understanding of the conditions of the people of that category in the social structure. In this sense structural approach or perspective is most suitable for the purpose of conceptualization of phenomena and analysis of facts in this study. It has been applied throughout the study.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

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- Objectives of the study
- Research questions
- Data and methodology

Chapter II - Field of the Study

- The Assam state
- The Cachar district
- The Karbi and Kuki tribes
- Boundaries of the Karbi and Kuki villages
- Health institutions
- Educational institutions
- Economic and commercial institutions
- Life style and food habit

Chapter III- The Respondents: Their Communities and Customs

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- Clan
- Family
- Customs and traditions
- Education
- Sanitation
- Economic condition

Chapter IV- Decision Making and the Women

- Women's participation in economic decision making
- Women's participation in social matters related to decision making
- Women's participation in health related decision-making
- Women's participation in political decision-making
- Decision making in selection of land and crops

Chapter V- Economic Status of the women

- Occupation / employment
- Wealth
- Saving and expenditure
- Economic security of widow

Chapter VI- Political Status of the Women

- Participation in gaon sabha meetings
- Awareness about development schemes under gaon panchayat
- Awareness about the role of gaon panchayat
- Level of satisfaction over the headman's role
- Participation in village administration
- Awareness about ngos
- Family attitude towards women's political participation
- Membership of political parties

Chapter VII- Health Status of the Women

- Sex ratio
- Mortality
- Access to health worker in the rural health

- Awareness of family planning
- Hygienic habit
- Mode of treatment
- Cultural restrictions for women during biological change
- Consumption of nutritious food during pregnancy
- Awareness of diseases

Chapter VIII- Education, Communication and Status of the Women

- Educational level
- Gender bias in child's education
- Communication status

Chapter IX- Summary, Findings and Conclusion
