

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UGC Minor Research Project on

“The Empowerment of Muslim Women in the Char (Riverine) Areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam: A Case Study of Char Areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District”

By Dr. Jaya Biswas Kunda

Major findings of the Minor Research Project on the topic entitled “The Empowerment of Muslim Women in the Char (Riverine) Areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam: A Case Study of Char Areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District”:

1. In terms of population structure the number of females is lower than the males in all the surveyed districts of Assam.
2. The sex-ratio of two districts namely, Goalpara and Bongaigaon are higher than the other two districts namely, Dhubri and Barpeta. Even the sex ratio of Dhubri and Barpeta district are lower than the sex-ratio of Assam.
3. The girl children receive less attention and care than the boys in respect to their self development.
4. Women are not economically independent. They are not self-reliant. Their participation in economy and earning is very low. They are not allowed to play an active role in family economy. They are not self-supporting.
5. Malnutrition and ill health is quite extensive among the females in the char villages.
6. Women’s participation in economic activities is passive, marginal and invisible.
7. Women’s accesses to economic resources are limited. Household or family is the area in which women’s activities are discernable. In fact, a well defined division of labour is observed on the basis of sex as they are engaged in indoor activities.
8. As women are engaged in domestic activities, they are honoured and respected to some extent in the family and society.
9. In the char villages/society women occupy an economically insignificant place which has certainly affected their social position particularly in decision making process.
10. In respect of decision making process particularly in household activities there is an

inequality between men and women as it is observed during interview. But, in the context of production and consumption matters the men dominates over womenfolk.

11. Both in Hindu and Muslim society women play a very crucial role in child rearing and socialisation of both boys and girls of the family.
12. Both Hindus and Muslims are patrilineal. As per Islamic rules a woman is entitled to possess land as well as the maternal property. But in practice, these are maintained and looked after by their male relatives. On the other hand, as per modern Hindu law a women belonging to Hindu cultural group is also entitled to possess land as well as to get equal share of paternal property.
13. The age at marriage of the Muslim females particularly in the surveyed char villages of our surveyed four districts are still lower. It has several negative consequences in the health of Muslim womenfolk as well as in social life. On the other hand, the age at marriage of females belonging to Hindu cultural groups as carrying out interviews in various towns of our four surveyed districts are not lower in comparison to Muslim females.
14. Dowry system is prevalent in the context of Muslim marriage to some extent in our surveyed villages. Such evil practice has certainly affected the position of womenfolk. On the other hand, though dowry system is prohibited as per Hindu law yet its practice in the context of Hindu marriage is yet to be abolished completely.
15. Widow remarriage is sanctioned in Islam. In matters of remarriage of the widows, Muslims exhibit much less rigidity of attitude. Widow remarriage is also sanctioned in Hindu society. In matters of remarriage of the widows, Hindus also exhibit flexibility.
16. Education is considered to be a vehicle of social mobility. But Muslim women's mobility in social ladder is very much depending on her marriage to a person of higher educational, economic and social status. Apart from this, it has been found that women's education is still not very popular among the Muslims. Illiteracy and lower level of education is quite rampant. In this respect, education level is more better among the Hindu cultural groups in comparison to Muslim womenfolk.
17. The women in the char villages of surveyed districts weave the fabric of family life. The domestic works are usually undertaken by women and grown up girls. Apart from this, they do participate in gardening, animal and fowl rearing, water fetching, firewood gathering together with assisting to clean the crops.

18. In the surveyed char villages, a liberal attitude towards women has not been shown relating to equality of treatment and opportunity. Certain restrictions have been imposed to prevent the women from massive outside interaction for the sake of their modesty, safety and chastity. Thus, women's activities have been limited and their privileges have been curtailed.
19. It has not been found strictness of "purdah" system in the char villages under study. Even a very few women in the several towns of these districts observe the tradition of purdah (seclusion). Probably poverty stricken society of char villages compel the womenfolk not to observe the tradition (purdah) in the stricter sense of the term. On the other hand, the contemporary process of modernisation might also change the attitude of guardians of the society.
20. In fact, the contemporary process of modernisation has both negative and positive effects on the life of the womenfolk belonging to both the Muslim and Hindu cultural groups. The growth of economic modernisation, use of new technology and skills under the emerging system have helped in the reflection of male values together with limited female values belonging to urban areas. This emerging values and situations determine the role of womenfolk in the rural/char areas even under changing situation.
21. Much of women's value in the family is now determined by the amount of cash they contribute for the family. The growth of market economy has affected the age old economic contribution of women by the way of their active participation in the production process in the fields of home garden, animal rearing, fowl keeping and indigenous craft making activities although a few womenfolk are engaged there under SHGs. The womenfolk are still far from earning cash for their hard work. Major portion of womenfolk are engaged in activities for which they are not paid for.
22. The effect of change has some positive aspects as new aspirations have been emerged amongst the parents and guardians particularly for Muslim womenfolk as the parents are now sending their girls to schools, colleges and universities along with technical and legal institutes. A huge number of girl students have been appearing in Masters Course through IDOL, G.U. in the Contact Centres of these four districts particularly belonging to Muslim community. The radical change noticed is the awareness of modern education for girls in Muslim society.
23. Under the changed political process since the mid 1990s because of 73rd and 74th

Amendment of Constitution the reservation of womenfolk in the three-tier Panchayat and Rural Development the women's role in the political process has been noteworthy in the char areas too. Womenfolk are gradually becoming aware and actively participating in the political and organisational matters of their village, district and even the state.

FINDINGS IN DETAILS:

Case Studies:

A. Char villages of Barpeta District:

1. Udmari: Udmari is a char village of Sonapur Gaon Panchayat under Rupshi Development Block. As per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam, the total population of this village is 825 having 425 males and 400 females. The sex ratio is 941 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 73.61 and the literacy rate is 18.79 percent. But as per Census-2011, the total population of this village is 2048 of which 1059 are males while 989 are females. The sex ratio of this village is 934 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio for the village as per Census-2011 is 961, lower than Assam state average of 962. Literacy rate of Udmari village is 57.31 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. In Udmari, male literacy stands at 60.68 percent while female literacy is 53.67 percent. There is no population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Udmari village of Barpeta district. Total workers of this village is 592 of which 545 males and 47 females. Along with 521 main workers and 71 marginal workers almost all the population belongs to religious minority.

2. Bamundongra: The Char village Bamundongra under Bamundongra Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block and the total population of this village is 624 having 313 males and 311 females as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The sex ratio is 993 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.31. The literacy rate of this village is 17.63 percent. But according to the Census-2011, its population stands at 2898 of which 1484 are males while 1414 are females and 0-6 age population is 568 which 19.60 percent of total population of village. Average sex ratio is 953 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio for the village is 939 which is lower than Assam average of 962. In 2011 literacy rate of this village is 57.04 percent compared to 72.19

percent of Assam. Male literacy stands at 63.56 percent while female literacy is 50.22 percent. There is no population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Bamundongra village of Barpeta district. Total workers of this village are 736 of which 691 are males and 45 females. Main workers stand at 694 and marginal worker is 42 having 30 males and 12 females. Major portion of this village population belongs to religious Minority.

3. Balajan: The char village Balajan is under Baghbar Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block. The total population of the village is 445 out of which 235 males and 210 females having a sex ratio of 893 as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.07 along with a literacy rate of 16.85 percent. But, as per Census-2011, its population stands at 944 of which 485 are males and 459 are females. Population of children with age 0-6 years is 193. It is 20.44 percent of total population of the village. Average sex ratio of this village is 946 which is much lower than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio for the village as per Census-2011 is 911 much lower than state average of 962. Literacy rate of this village is 39.28 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. Male literacy is 40.63 percent while female literacy is 37.87 percent. There is no population belonging to SC and ST. Major portion of the population belongs to religious minority. Total workers of this village stands at 231 of which 218 are males and 13 females. Main workers of this village is 224 and marginal worker is 7 in which 1 male and 6 females.

4. Char Charia: Char Charia is char village. The village is under the Gaon Panchayat of Guliza and Rupshi Development Block. The total population of this village is 1590 having 798 males and 792 females with a sex ratio of 992 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line 70.94 as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The literacy rate is 17.61 percent. But, according to Census-2011, the village has population of 1686 of which 909 are males and 777 females. In Char Charia village population of children with age 0-6 years is 370, which is 21.95 percent of total population. Average sex ratio of Char Charia village is 855 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio is 927 which is lower than Assam state average of 962. In 2011 literacy rate of Char Charia village is 48.78 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. In Char Charia male literacy stands at 54.25 percent while female literacy is 42.24 percent. There is no population of to SC and ST in the village of Char Charia. The village is mainly dominated by religious minority.

5. Dakhin Godhuni: The char village Dakhin Godhuni is under the Gaon Panchayat of Dakhin Godhuni and Chenga Development Block. The village has population of 1325 with 675 males and 650 females and sex ratio is 962. The percentage of family living below poverty line is 66.81 and the literacy rate is 17.58 percent. But, according to Census-2011, the population of this village is 2600 of which 1330 are males and 1270 females having average sex ratio is 955 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. The Dakhin Godhuni N.C.C village has 573 child population under 0-6 age group which is 22.04 percent of total population of the village. Literacy rate of Dakhin Godhuni is 37.15 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. Male literacy of the village is 40.57 percent while female literacy rate is 33.44 percent. There is no population belonging to SC and ST. The village is predominantly inhabited by religious minority. Total workers of the village stands at 993 and having main workers 712 and marginal workers 281 of which 76 males and 205 females.

B. Char villages of Bongaigaon District:

1. Bharalipara Pt I: The village Bharalipara Pt I is under Nashatra Bghekaity Gaon Panchayat and Tapaitary Development Block having population of 708 of which 351 males and 357 females having sex ratio of 1017 and the family living below poverty line 67.80 percent along with literacy rate of 12.45 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. But, according to Census-2011, the village Bharalipara Pt I has 881 population of which 477 are males and 404 females having sex ratio of 847 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio of the village is 730 lower than state average of 962. Literacy rate of this village is 49.85 percent of which male literacy stands at 50.00 percent and female literacy rate is 49.69 percent as per Census-2011. Total population belonging to SC is 7 of which 2 males and 5 females. Total worker stands at 232 of which 187 main worker and 45 marginal worker. Out of 45 marginal workers 44 are males and 1 female.

2. Bharalipara Pt II: The char village Bharalipara Pt II is under Nashatra Bghekaity Gaon Panchayat and Tapaitary Development Block. It has a population of 936 having 473 males and 463 females along with sex ratio of 978 as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. 67.70 percent family is below the poverty line having literacy rate of 12.39 percent. But as per Population Census-2011, the village population is 1529 having 784 males and 745 females. The average sex ratio is 950 which is lower than the state average. The total child population (0-6 years) is 333 which is 21.78 percent of total population of the

village. Child sex ratio is 1108 which is higher than the state average of 962. The literacy rate of the village is 50.50 percent which is lower than state literacy rate of 72.19 percent having male literacy rate of 57.67 percent and female literacy rate at 42.63 percent. Its 20.41 percent population belongs to SC/ST having 312 SC and 1 ST person. Total workers of the village is 420 having 382 males and 38 females. The main worker stands at 377 and marginal worker stands at 43.

3. Jharpara-I: The village is under the Gaon Panchayat of Lengtisingha and Tapaitary Development Block having population of 1455 with 724 males and 731 females and the sex ratio of 1009. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.70 along with people literacy rate of 12.51 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. But as per Population Census-2011, the village Jharpara-I has population of 1252 of which 671 are males and 581 females. The average sex ratio of the village is 866 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. The population of children (0-6 age) is 246 which is 19.55 percent of the total population of the village. Child sex ratio is 757 as per Census-2011 Literacy rate of the village is 62.62 percent which is lower than state literacy rate which stands at 72.19 percent. Male literacy rate stands at 64.97 percent while female literacy is 60 percent. No population belongs to SC and ST is found in the village. The population is dominated by religious minority. Total workers of the village stands at 374 of which 363 are males and 51 females of which 363 main workers and 11 marginal workers. There are 6 marginal workers belonging to males and 5 females.

4. Kahibari Pt-I: Kahibari Pt-I is under Srijan-Gram Gaon Panchayat and Srijangram Development Block. The population of the village is 1032 of which 557 males and 475 females having sex ratio of 852 together with 66.51 percent family living below the poverty line with 12.50 percent literacy rate as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. But, according to Census-2011, the population of this village is 1121 of which 575 are males and 546 females having average sex ratio is 950 which is lower than Assam state average of 958. The child population (0-6 age group) is 245 having sex ratio of 1008 which is higher than Assam state average of 962. The literacy rate of the village is 50.23 percent of which male literacy is 57.84 percent while female literacy rate is 42.08 percent. The total workers stand at 351 of which 263 are males and 88 females. The main workers accounts for 263. The number of marginal workers is 88 having 24 males and 64 females. There is no population belonging to SC and ST category.

5. Tinkonia-I: The village is under Malegarch Gaon Panchayat and Tapaitary Development Block. The total population of this village is 1999 having 1010 males and 983 females with a sex ratio of 967 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line 66.75 as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The literacy rate is 12.41 percent. But, according to Population Census-2011, the village has population of 1108 of which 584 are males and 524 are females. The average sex ratio is 897 which is lower than state average of 958. The 0-6 age population is 229 which is 20.67 percent of the total population having sex ratio of 1045 higher than state average of 962. The literacy rate of the village as per Census-2011 is 51.99 percent lower than Assam state literacy rate of 72.19 percent. Male literacy stands at 58.47 percent while female literacy is 44.47 percent. There is population belonging to SC category numbering 840 (437 males and 403 females). The village is mainly dominated by religious minority. No population is found belonging to ST category. Total workers of the village are 296 with 287 males and 9 females. There are 235 main workers and 61 marginal workers. There are 60 males and 1 female belonging to the marginal workers. It is important to note here that there are 75.81 percent population belonging to SC category as per Census 2011.

C. Char villages of Dhubri District:

1. Mowkhowa: The char village Mowkhowa is under Bohalpur (1) Gaon Panchayat and Chapor Block and Nayeralgra Char Development Project. As per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam, the total population of this village is 1149 having 575 males and 574 females having sex ratio of 998. The number of family living below the poverty line is 131 out of 190 with 68.95 percent and the literacy rate is 14.62 percent. But as per Census-2011, the total population of this village is 829 of which 410 are males while 419 are females having sex ratio 1022 which is higher than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio for the village is 1113 which is also higher than Assam state average of 962. Literacy rate of the village is 54.85 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. Male literacy stands at 59.09 percent while female literacy is 50.61 percent. There is no population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Mowkhowa village of Dhubri district. Total workers of this village are 227 of which 209 are males and 18 females. The number of main workers is 185 and marginal workers is 42.

2. Kathalbari: The village Kathalbari is under Kathalbari Gaon Panchayat and Fekamari Development Block having population of 1098 (Males= 577 & Females= 521) with sex ratio

of 902 with literacy rate of 14.57 percent and the family living below the poverty line is 68.85 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. But according to Population Census-2011, its population stands at 4821 of which 2396 are males while 2425 are females having sex ratio of 1012 which is higher than the state average of 958. Child sex ratio for Kathalbari village is 1045 which is higher than Assam state average of 962. In 2011 literacy rate of this village is 44.95 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam having male literacy rate of 50.32 percent while female literacy 39.61 percent. The village is dominated by religious minority and there is no population belonging to SC and ST. Total workers of this village are 736 of which 691 are males and 45 females. Total workers stand at 1698 having 1266 male and 432 female workers. The main workers stand at 1272 along with 426 marginal workers in which 212 are males and 214 females.

3. Sukchar Pt II: The village Sukchar Part-II is under Sukchar Gaon Panchayat and Fekamari Development Block. The total population of the village is 934 out of which 493 males and 441 females having a sex ratio of 894 as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 70.87 along with a literacy rate of 14.56 percent. But, as per Census-2011, its population stands at 430 with 92 families of which 232 are males and 198 are females having sex ratio of 853. Child sex ratio for the village is 767. Both the sex ratios are lower than the Assam state average 958 and 962 respectively. Literacy rate of this village is 20.68 percent with male literacy of 18.60 percent and female literacy rate 23.03 percent. There are 171 total workers of which 116 are males and 55 females. There are 136 main workers and 35 marginal workers. Among the marginal workers 4 are males and 31 females.

4. Gutipara Part I: The village Gutipara Part-I is under the Gaon Panchayat of Kajaikata and Nayeralga Development Block. The total population of this village is 738 having 477 males and 261 females with a sex ratio of 547 with literacy rate of 14.63 percent and the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 69.10 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. As per Population Census-2011, the village has population of 1006 of which 525 are males and 481 females and average sex ratio is 916. Average child sex ratio is 973 higher than Assam average of 962. There is no population belonging to SC or ST category. The village is dominated by religious minority. Literacy rate of this village is 27.06 percent with male literacy of 27.78 percent and female literacy rate 26.27 percent. There are total 324 workers of which 314 are males and 10 females. There

are 267 main workers and 57 marginal workers. Among the marginal workers 54 are males and 3 are females.

5. Fulerchar Part-I: The village Fulerchar Part-I is under the Gaon Panchayat of Fulerchar and Fekamari Development Block. The village has population of 699 with 369 males and 330 females having sex ratio of 894 and the rate of literacy is 14.59 percent along with family living below poverty line is 68.97 percent. According to Census-2011, the population of this village is 1363 of which 681 are males and 682 females and the average sex ratio is 1001 higher than the Assam state average of 958. The child sex ratio (0-6) as per Census-2011 is 976 which is also higher than state average of 962. Literacy rate of the village is 53.96 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. Male literacy of the village is 57.58 percent while female literacy rate is 50.36 percent. The village has 320 households. There are no people belonging to SC and ST category. The village is predominantly inhabited by religious minority i.e. Muslims. Total workers of the village stands at 490 of which 355 are males and 135 are females. The number of main workers is 362 and the number of marginal workers is 128 having 48 males and 80 females.

D. Char villages of Goalpara District:

1. Nizbogoribari: The village Nizbogoribari is under Rowkhowa Gaon Panchayat and Lakhipur Block and Nayeralgra Char Development Project. As per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam, the total population of this village is 1861 having 949 males and 912 females having sex ratio of 963. The literacy rate is 13.65 percent and percentage of families living below the poverty line is 67.74 percent. But as per Census-2011, Nizbogoribari is a small village of 10 families having population of 47 of which 23 are males and 24 are females and the sex ratio is 1043 which is higher than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio for the village is 1000 which is also higher than Assam state average of 962. Literacy rate of the village is 41.03 percent. Male literacy stands at 36.84 percent while female literacy is 45.00 percent. There is no population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) in the village. Total workers of this village are 15 of which 13 are males and 2 females. There is no main worker; all the workers are marginal worker.

2. Lotibari: The village Lotibari is under Rowkhowa Gaon Panchayat and Lakhipur Development Block. As per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam, the village is having population of 889 with 456 males and 433 females with sex ratio of 959; the literacy rate is 13.05 percent and the family living below the poverty line is 67.57 percent as per. But according to Population Census-2011, its population stands at 405 of which 215 are males while 190 are females. The sex ratio of the village is 884 which is much lower than the state average of 958. Child sex ratio for Lotibari village is 754 which is also much lower than Assam state average of 962. In 2011 literacy rate of this village is 10.74 which is very much lower than state literacy rate of 72.19 percent. Male literacy rate of the village stands at 12.34 percent and female literacy rate is 9.03 percent. The village is dominated by Muslim population and there is no population belonging to SC and ST. Total number of workers of this village is 114 of which all are male. The number of main workers is 103 and marginal worker is 11.

3. Thailapara Part-I: The village Thailapara Part-I is under Rowkhowa Gaon Panchayat and Lakhipur Development Block. The total population of the village is 1099 out of which 504 males and 535 females having a sex ratio of 1061 as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.92 along with a literacy rate of 14.01 percent. But, as per Census-2011, its population stands at 203 of which 109 are males and 94 with total households of 31. Average sex ratio of the village is 853 lower than Assam state average of 958. Child sex ratio for the village is 964 compared to state average of 962. Literacy rate of this village is 24.32 percent with male literacy of 20.99 percent and female literacy rate 28.36 percent. There is no population belonging to SC or ST category. Major portion of the population belongs to religious minority. There are total 51 workers of which 47 are males and 4 are females. The number of main workers is 22 and marginal workers 29.

4. Rowkhowa-II: According to Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam the village Rowkhowa-II is under the Gaon Panchayat of Rowkhowa and Lakhipur Development Block. The total population of this village is 1149 having 589 males and 560 females with a sex ratio of 950 and literacy rate of 14.97 percent and the percentage of families living below the poverty line is 67.60 percent. But as per Population Census-2011, the village has population of 823 out of which 430 are males and 390 females and average sex ratio is 914 which is lower than the Assam state average of 958. Average child sex ratio is 920 which is also lower than Assam average of 962. Literacy rate of this village is 26.81

percent with male literacy of 25.16 percent and female literacy rate 28.62 percent. There is no population belonging to SC or ST category. The village is dominated by religious minority. There are total 226 workers of which 221 are males and 5 are females. The number of main workers is 160 and marginal workers are 66 of which 63 are males and 3 are females.

5. Bhoismari: The village Bhoismari is under the Gaon Panchayat of Suktola and Lakhipur Development Block. The village has population of 577 with 296 are males and 281 are females with a sex ratio of 949 and the rate of literacy is 9.88 percent along with family living below poverty line is 68.18 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. According to Census-2011, the population of this village is 753 of which 386 are males and 367 females and the average sex ratio is 351 lower than the Assam state average of 958. The child population (0-6) is 161 which is 21.38 percent of the total population of the village having sex ratio of 1064 which is higher than state average of 962. Literacy rate of the village is 41.55 percent compared to 72.19 percent of Assam. Male literacy of the village is 37.66 percent while female literacy rate is 45.77 percent. The village has no population belonging to SC and ST category. The village is dominated by religious minority i.e. immigrant Muslims. Total workers of the village stands at 385 of which 202 are males and 183 are females. The number of main workers is 217 and the number of marginal workers is 168 having 1 male and 167 females.

It is very difficult to determine political consciousness. The role of womenfolk in family, society and political processes to some extent is same because of patrilineal societal linkages of social structure of South Asia barring a few matrilineal communities in the Southwest and North East in India. It is said that economically empowered womenfolk can take independent decision of their own in family, society, academic area along with in political process as many studies have shown and justified. We have surveyed 20 villages (5 villages of each district) and interviewed a number of Muslim women of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri district. The findings of surveyed villages confirm that the womenfolk who are members of SHGs can also take independent decision regarding health check - up of their children together with getting admission of their children to a better school. They can also participate in the protest meetings organized by political party along with casting their votes according to their own will. Thus SHG movement has certainly has enhanced the confidence of womenfolk along with raising political outlook. During the campaign of last Panchayat Election Central Committee leading Member of CPIM, Mr. Hemen Das, reported in an interview that Mr. Das was surprised of experiencing Muslim

womenfolk's participation in political meeting at Baguriguri Pathar under Bamagar Circle of Barpeta District. .

In fact, Muslim women's participation in the processions, meetings arranged and organized by the various political parties is surprising and noteworthy in comparison to womenfolk belonging to Hindus. In the questionnaire of our "Muslim Women Survey" of 20 villages confirm our hypothetical question that they do participate in the political process not because they are restrained by religious barriers but they do join in the field of political arena for economic benefit and redressing of poverty and hardship.

Bina Agarwal (2000 : 60) has rightly observed thus: "Economic necessity is leading many women to challenge social norms either explicitly or implicitly. For instance in parts of northern rural South Asia, purdah norms require that women do not seek employment outside the home, especially not in the field of others, but poverty compels many women to do precisely that. In doing so, they break purdah norms and so implicitly challenge those norms. However, group solidarity and collective action appear critical for explicitly and effectively contesting such norms"

Bina Agarwal (2000) has also beautifully illustrated the experience of women members of the NGO, BRAC (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) in Bangladesh and she has remarked that on the one hand, economic want has compelled women to seek outside work and challenge restrictive purdah norms: "They say that what we do is shameful, carries no dignity-----would it be good to sit without work and food, abiding by what they say? ----- we do not listen to the 'Mullahs' anymore;" on the other hand, group solidarity within BRAC has clearly strengthened women's ability to effectively alter the norms. As some BRAC women noted:

"Now nobody talks ill of us. They say, "They have formed a group and now they earn money. It is good." BRAC women also report that, as a result of their economic contributions and group strength, their husbands are now less opposed to them joining BRAC, less physically and verbally abusive, more willing to allow them freedom of movement and more tolerant toward their interaction with male strangers in work contexts. In other words, there has been a loosening of restrictive social norms both within the home and outside it (Ibid: 2000)."

We have witnessed many Muslim women at the time of the counting of votes in the last Panchayat Election (2013) that shook their hands with winning males candidates. They contested the election, participated actively and led the womenfolk right from the front. It is also noted that major portion of Muslim women of the surveyed villages of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri districts like other Muslim dominated districts of Assam cast their votes with great vigour unlike the Hindu women. In an interview some of Muslim women do admit that they do cast their votes for fear of deleting their names from the electoral rolls. And as a follow-up action they will be treated as “foreigners”. We remind them that without castings votes do not necessarily mean deletion of names from the electoral rolls. Yet, heavy turnout of Muslim women can be witnessed during poll whether it is Panchayat or Assembly or Parliamentary in comparison to Hindu womenfolk.

They are actively joining the developmental activities along with male members in connection with submitting memoranda to the Block Development Officer, Circle Officer even the Deputy Commissioner of Barpeta District regarding controlling rise in prices, implementing public distribution system, condemning militants activities in the country in general and Assam in particular, along with implementation of NREGA schemes transparently etc. The Muslim womenfolk of surveyed villages of above mentioned districts have been playing significant role in connection with participating actively in the democratic movement.

We have interviewed a large number of Muslim women to know their position in the family, society as well as in the political process together with women’s economic independence. It is amazing that Muslim womenfolk belonging to rural areas are more conscious about their rights than the urban women of the district. It is also interesting to note here that so called educated Muslim women of several towns (e.g. Bilasipara, Chapor, Goalpara, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Howly, Kalagachia, Barpeta, Barpeta Road) of our surveyed districts are not at all interested in participating in the political process. They are simply reluctant so far as politics is concerned. Even they are indifferent about their position in the society. It is unfortunate that they are also abided by the religious strictures. But, on the other hand, Muslim women belonging to rural areas of Sarukhetri, Kalgachia, Bahari, Mandia, Mankachar, Lengtisingha, etc. are much more conscious about their rights and their role in the civil society. Lesser-educated and low-and-insecure earners both within and outside the family do plays significant role for egalitarian and democratic society, as there has been a

loosening of restrictive social norms for these rural womenfolk both within the home and outside it.

As per our survey it is observed that womenfolk of char villages are not allowed to go to nearby households after the sunset. In fact, Kasema Khatun (1997) one of the leading scholars of char areas of Assam has rightly observed that young girls particularly belonging to the Muslim community are prohibited to go/ move nearby houses after the sunset. They are also prohibited from going to ghats of the river in the evening. It is also the practice and tradition in the Muslim dominated char villages that after the demise of husband, a widow if she desires may accept brother-in-law (husband's younger brother) as husband or brother-in-law may accept sister-in-law (wife of an elder brother) as wife. In other words, widow remarriage and marriage a divorced lady are prevalent in Muslim dominated char villages of our surveyed villages and towns of the districts of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri in particular and Assam in general. It is also found that the marriage of very young girls belonging to the Muslims particularly in the char villages of our surveyed districts is still quite prevalent. In fact, marriage of female char dwellers at the age of 12 to 16 years is commonly noticed. Polygamy is also allowed in the surveyed char villages like other Muslim dominated societies. In this connection the observation of Sheikh Rahim Mandal (2005) is noteworthy as he has rightly remarked that the position of women in Muslim society is not of uniform pattern and their position differs from society to society. While reviewing the position of women in cross-cultural perspective according to S.R. Mandal (Ibid: 2005) it was observed that the status varies from one country to another for various reasons. He also maintains that the status and position of Muslim women differs largely due to differences in political system ranging from religious to secular, consecutive to liberal and traditional to modern perspectives. He has also categorised Muslim countries into three namely, traditional (Saudi Arabia), transitional (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia etc.) and modern (Turkey) and as per his observation the Muslim women irrespective of countries and societies are forging for a new identity by playing diversified roles, ascribed as well as achieved wing to change of the contemporary global scenario and this change of identity of women is more marked in modernised countries and less in transitional countries and least in traditional Muslim countries (S.R. Mandal: 2005).

According to S.R. Mandal (2005) socially Muslims are not a monolithic community as these are social divisions among them on the basis of sect, sub-sect, ethnic, linguistic and cultural background. A "caste like" and "class like" divisions are also found among them. On

the whole Muslims are economically and educationally very backward owing to tradition and various other factors.

In fact, the char villages of our selected districts are Muslim dominated villages and they are mainly from some cultural background. They are economically and educationally very backward. It is observed in our surveyed villages that Muslims are considered as a monolithic community as they came from erstwhile East Bengal/ East Pakistan/ Bangladesh. So, the polygamy, joint family system, the practice of Purdah are some of the component characteristics of Muslim society of char villages of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri. It is also worthwhile to mention here that the birth of a girl is considered as unfortunate and unpleasant event in the poverty stricken Muslim families of char areas as like as poverty stricken Hindu families as has been observed in the survey as per child sex ratio of the surveyed villages. As per Islamic rules a women is entitled to possess land as well as the maternal property. Of course, these are maintained and looked after by their male relatives. Today, womenfolk belonging to Hindu community have been exercising the right of possessing the property rights more vigorously as per Hindu law. As the char areas are fluctuated because of flood and erosion, so major portion of char dwellers suffer loss of huge areas of landed property every year. Thus, the right to possess land by womenfolk (belonging to both Muslim and Hindu Communities) of char villages fail to make any change and significant impact on their lives.

The general observation of Kasema Khatun (1997), S.R. Mondal (2005), Zoya Hasan and Ritun Menon (2006), Sachar Committee Report, Assam Human Development Report 2003 and 2014 were taken into consideration by our field studies and also carrying out interviews and participatory observations through focused interviews so far as our surveyed villages and towns in order to prepare our study report relating to economic empowerment of womenfolk in the char area of Brahmaputra valley of Assam highlighting the char areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District. Even the Socio-Economic Survey Report of Char Areas of Assam, 2002-03 and Census of India 2001 & 2011 were taken into consideration for findings of our study and concluding remarks.

As mentioned earlier, our study area is char areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District. Out of those four districts we have selected 5 villages of each district. That is, total number of villages is 20. We have selected these villages at random. After selection of village, we have decided to survey 10 household of each village which we have

selected too at random. As almost all the char villages are dominated by Muslim population barring a few so we have decided to carry out interview in town areas of these four districts in order to collect data from all religious groups regarding women empowerment. Apart from these, we had to rely on participatory observation and focussed interview in the areas of four districts in which cosmopolitan character of the people is discernable. In short, we have decided to adopt a combination of descriptive analysis and use of select aggregate data on a purposive basis with some case studies, participant observation, questionnaire, schedules and personal interviews which has been explained in the introductory chapter.

In our sample all the respondents of whom majority were less than of thirty years (30) of age, were married and Muslims barring a very few belonging to other religious and cultural groups particularly from SCs and OBCs. Within family the women members particularly Muslim women members had low autonomy as we have grouped different indicators in our questionnaire as low, moderate and high women's autonomy to a scale (7 numbers). So far as women's autonomy is concerned the analysis of the questionnaire has been constructed thus:

It has been constructed from the reported decision-making power of woman with respect to (a) what to cook, (b) obtaining health care, (c) purchase jewellery, (d) respondent staying with family, (e) how money will be spent; and freedom movement with respect to (a) go to market and (b) visit relatives. In the case of decision-making, the codes used are: Own decision= 2; Joint decision= 1; Other= 0. In the case of freedom movement, the codes are: Yes= 2; No= 0. The total autonomy score ranges from 0 to 16. It has been classified as low (0-5), moderate (6-11) and high (12-16).

Accordingly, 74.00% was found to have low autonomy in decision making and a zero percent of high decision making in the char villages which we have surveyed particularly from Muslim women. But in case of Hindu women belonging to SC community it was found that 65% women had low autonomy having a zero percent of high decision making. Even after carrying interviews in town areas, particularly Howly, Mandia, Abhayapuri, Bilasipara, Dhubri, Goalpara it was found some kind of variation particularly regarding women's autonomy belonging to religious minority. Although questions were not designed like the above mentioned 7 scales in connection with carrying out personal interviews it was observed that 55% women had low autonomy in decision making having 5% high autonomy together with 40% moderate autonomy. In matter of Hindu religious groups belonging to

Bengali women and Asamiya women the autonomy of Asamiya womenfolk having 45% in low autonomy was better than Bengali womenfolk who had 50% in low autonomy classification after carrying out personal interviews. In matter of Bengali and Asamiya womenfolk so far as autonomy in decision making within the family it was observed 12% high autonomy amongst the Bengali Hindu womenfolk and 15% high autonomy amongst the Asamiya womenfolk. But it was observed that so far as SC and OBC categories were concerned after carrying out interviews the position of womenfolk belonging to these categories were found better than the mainstream caste Hindu both Bengali and Asamiya social and cultural groups as SC womenfolk had 40% and 42% from OBC category having 20% and 22% high autonomy respectively.

Almost all the women respondents were housewives (90%) with the remaining engaged in agricultural works so far as our surveyed char villages are concerned. 70% returned with no monthly income, 25% having income in between 1000-2000 and remaining womenfolk having income between 2000-5000. Expenditure pattern revealed a pattern of subsistence living and none of the women respondents owned land in the char villages. Almost all the women respondents in char villages would take decision in consultation with their husbands. Given this, it was amazing that 97% of women respondents (when we carried out personal interviews) refused to find any gender discrimination in the family. Probably they did not have any clear idea of gender discrimination at all. Another reason may be they feared to divulge regarding the discrimination what they faced. We had distinguished five stages of household socio-economic status regarding the women socio-economic empowerment in the surveyed char villages. A composite index of household socio-economic status or standard of living index was constructed by combining house type, toilet facility, source of lighting, fuel for cooking, source of drinking water, separate room for cooking, ownership of house, ownership of agricultural land, ownership of irrigated land, ownership of livestock and ownership of durable goods like car, television, telephone, mobile phones etc. This index score ranges from (1) 1-8: Low SLI; (2) 9-15: Lower Middle SLI; (3) 16-22: Middle SLI; (4) 23-32: Upper Middle SLI; (5) 33-48: High SLI.

In terms of this criterion 80% of the households of women respondents had low economic status and the rest belong to lower middle category. It is observed that both the category of womenfolk especially Muslim womenfolk and womenfolk belong to SC category amongst the Hindus do have the same low economic status in the char villages. But, when we carried out interviews in the town areas of Barpeta Road, Sorbhog, Bongaigaon, Chapar,

Bagribari, Gauripor, Barpeta, Golokganj etc. it was found that the economic status of the womenfolk had somewhat different in both the Hindus and Muslim cultural groups together with different variations amongst the SC and OBC cultural groups of the people. Although the information based on personal interviews particularly on the womenfolk engaged on economic activity does not reflect the women empowerment of char areas of four districts yet it may throw some light on the issue of women empowerment in town area belonging to all communities.

It is not unnatural to expect that Muslim women are unlikely to play a positive role when they are largely illiterate. It was found in the surveyed char villages 65% were illiterate, 22% studied up to below seven, 8% studied up to HS and 5% HS and above. This safely explains why 82% had very low exposure mass media. Exposure to mass media derives from the responses to three questions: If a woman listened to the radio at least once in a week and went to a movie theatre at least once a month. If a woman responded yes to all the three questions, she was coded as having high exposure; if she responded yes to any two items, she was coded having moderate exposure and if she responded yes to either one or no items, she was coded low exposure. It is worthwhile to note here that there was not a single case of high exposure to mass media. Consistently our respondents 82% showed a low level of autonomy on a three point scale. There was no case of high women's autonomy. Here again, a somewhat different picture was perceived while carrying out interviews at personal and group level in the above mentioned town areas of the Districts of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri although asking a different category of questions. Of course, Muslim womenfolk had lower exposure and autonomy in comparison to Hindu womenfolk both Asamiya and Bengali cultural groups. In this respect, womenfolk belonging to SC category had lower autonomy than womenfolk belonging to Hindu high castes. Even the womenfolk belonging to OBC category did have better position than the SC and Muslim womenfolk.

All the women respondents in our surveyed villages/ chars together with some towns and census towns of our selected four districts were asked questions relating to political participation. The questions were asked as under:

- Whether they do know the minimum age of voting or not.
- Whether they do know about the right to vote or not.
- Whether they do know the name of present Chief Minister of Assam or not.

- Whether they do know the name of the candidates who contested the last Parliamentary Election (2014) from their constituency or not.
- Whether they do know the name of President of their Gaon Panchayat or not.
- Whether the respondent is a member of any political party or not.
- Whether the respondent cast her vote as the candidate – the party – or the election symbol or not.
- Whether the respondent cast vote at her own choice or at the direction of the head of the family or not.
- Whether she does participate any political meeting at her own choice organised by any political party or not.
- Whether they attended the meeting of the Gram Sabha or not.

If the respondent responded “Yes” to any six questions she was scored 18 and classified as moderate participation in political process. If the respondent responded “No” to all the questions she was scored 0 having 0 point for each negative response and it has been classified as low participation in political process. In terms of this criterion 75% showed low participation in political process with the remaining showing moderate participation.

However, while interviewing selected respondents it was observed that women turn out in large numbers in political meetings and processions. Some of them are also members of Krishak Sabhas and Mahila Samities. Since Gram Sabha meetings are not held regularly, the data about their participation there were not available. Some of them responded that they are harassed in the name of “D” voters. Some of them responded that they considered the Panchayat and other elections just like as festivals. Heavy turnout in any election (Panchayat or assembly or Parliamentary) proves that womenfolk of char villages are politically conscious. In this respect, it may be said that low level of political participation and political awareness as revealed from our surveyed data is sharp contrast with the high level of turn out during election. This high percentage of Muslim women voters during any election in comparison to Hindu womenfolk may be due to the political awareness amongst the womenfolk of char villages. The explanation may lie at the fact of unsecured identity and sometimes even of nationality of the inhabitants of the char areas. Participation in politically mobilised meetings may be a way of bargaining for political support in their quest for security and survival.

Of all the respondents 35% were members of Self Help Groups. This low figure of SHG membership in our surveyed char villages is probably due to the late introduction of SHG in Assam. Some scholars are of the opinion that the presence of active NGOs fails to mobilise womenfolk of char areas so that SHG movement has not become successful in a significant manner. It has been observed that Block Development Offices are run from remote locations because of unstable climate conditions and geo-physical constraints. Yet, we found that all the indicators of development relating to the members of SHGs show that a little bit of education, slightly higher income, a better awareness can be associated with the members of SHGs. Apart from this, it is through the SHGs the self-confidence of the womenfolk may be enhanced in the char areas which is not discernable. However, although there is no positive proof that SHGs have any direct contribution to women's empowerment in the char areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri districts yet the role of SHGs should not be underestimated as it is through the SHGs the womenfolk of char villages may be mobilised for better assistance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The socio-economic, educational status and (political awareness of Muslim women in Assam in general and surveyed villages of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri districts in particular is simply dismal like other parts of India. Of course, at this era of globalization women belonging to any religious community are the worst victims. Several reports and studies have observed that the position of the Muslims in our society is not at all satisfactory; rather they are considered as like other disadvantaged / marginalized groups e.g. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes etc. When a community is to be considered as disadvantaged group how can we expect the better socio-economic, education and political awareness belonging to womenfolk to that community or group barring a Tribal society. Of course, Muslim Women Survey conducted by Hasan and Menon shows that Muslims are slightly better off than the Scheduled Castes.

It is true that rural Muslim womenfolk in our surveyed villages are more interested in joining in political process via Village Panchayat, Assembly and Parliament than the womenfolk of Towns or Semi Towns (as interviews conducted in some towns in Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District) yet it cannot be safely stated that Muslim womenfolk of these districts want revolutionary change of the social structure. They are the members of Krishak Shabhas (Peasant's Front), Ganatantric Mahila Samities (Progressive

Women's Front) as information collected through interviews yet major portion of Muslim womenfolk do not know what the 'class' is as defined by Karl Marx. They have lot of problems but major portion of them do not know how these will be solved. In fact, they do not know how they will be emancipated. Thus.-a 'new approach' is the need of the hour along with Marxist approach at this era of globalization to enhance the socio-economic position of Muslim women along with other womenfolk belonging to other sect/religion along with SC, ST and OBC.

It is worthwhile to mention here that three key factors contribute to the low socio-economic status of Muslims: educational attainment; occupational profile; the concentration of large proportions of Muslims in the economically and socially backward regions of the country - a point stressed by the National Commission on Minorities (NCM) which notes that 'a rather alarming percentage of the minority, particularly the poorer section among Muslims, live in these states' (Quoted in Hasan and Menon : 2004). All these factors can also be observed so far as Assam in general and Barpeta District in particular is concerned in regard to Muslim women's educational attainment, occupational profile along with the settlement of Muslim women in the socially and economically backward areas in Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District of Assam.

It is usually said that Islam imposes cultural restrictions, such as Purdah and therefore greater gender inequality; but according to MWS conducted by Hasan and Menon these restrictions on women's physical mobility are not limited to Muslim women since other communities share them in more or less the same degrees.

Though we have not experienced such kind of restrictions on accessibility of Muslim Women yet it can be said that it is because of economic necessity Muslim Women participate in the low-paid jobs in informal sector. As Muslims and as women, they are twice as disadvantaged in access to jobs generally and possibly even low-level jobs in the informal sector and casual labour (Ibid: 2006).

We have observed through our surveyed villages that most Muslim Women do not adopt family planning and they assume that children are the gifts of God. But in the town and semi-town areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District gives us opposite picture. Muslim Women in these areas particularly from educated middle class usually adopt family planning device. Muslim Women in the rural areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri District are conscious regarding health and medical facilities although due to

inadequate medical facilities they are very much dependent on Quake. The major reason for the low work participation of Muslim Women so far as our surveyed villages is concerned for their restricted engagement in agriculture. Even the ownership of property has denied economic independence, which has ultimately stood as stumbling block in connection with decision-making process. The residential place of the Muslims is so backward and their dwelling roof is so deplorable that they are supposed to prepare themselves to face flood, erosion etc. The “char” or “riverine” areas of Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri districts are dominated by the Muslims population. After conducting interview in some of the “chars” of these Districts we can experience gloomy picture relating to the socioeconomic, educational and political consciousness of the Muslim women. That is why the Human Development Report 2003 and 2014 along with gender Development Index of the districts is unsatisfactory in comparison to other districts of Assam. The question of Most Muslim Women is not the question of Socio-economic and Political status rather the question of ‘Survival’. Probably, the question of survival has compelled the most Muslim Women as our survey indicates, to participate the political meetings organized by several political parties. Although most Muslim Women castes their votes like most Hindu womenfolk consulting their husbands, yet probably because of “survival” question most of them consider the election as great festival and rate of voting female percentage is more high in comparison to other womenfolk belonging to other cultural groups. Until and unless the social structure is changed the position of womenfolk whether it is belonging to Muslim women or Hindu will not be changed. Self-Help Groups movement can enhance confidence of womenfolk’ along with empowering to some extent at this era of globalization; but it cannot emancipate the womenfolk. It can relief pain but cannot cure the disease. Though the radical change of social structure is the ultimate end yet the democratic and socialist movement is the need of the hour to improve the socio-economic condition of Muslim womenfolk along with improving educational attainment which would ultimately contribute in decision making process as of late, gender development is central to the process of human development; in Assam with its strong traditions of women’s involvement in agriculture and production, gender development is pivotal to both economic growth and human development and that is why a new paradigm with women at the core will ensure better participation of men and women and help the society and the economy to grow and a participatory approach to development can give the much needed thrust to the economy and ensure equality and justice to all (AHDR – 2003).