

CHAPTER – 4

WOMEN IN FAMILY, SOCIETY AND POLITICAL PROCESSES

4.1 Introduction

The present chapter is concerned with our field based studies in the three Development Blocks of Barpeta District of Assam comprising a major segment of the Char Areas of the Brahmaputra Valley. We conducted both field surveys and interviews to arrive at an understanding of women's position in family, society and political processes. The present chapter has been divided into 5 sections including the present introductory section. Section two presents a general profile of the Barpeta District together with brief details of the Char villages under our sample. The third section presents brief profiles of three Development Blocks. The fourth section presents our major research findings through Tables and Charts. The fifth section concludes the chapter.

4.2 General profile of the Barpeta district

The Barpeta district was carved out of erstwhile Kamrup district of Assam in July 1983. Created as a Civil Sub-Division in 1841 by the British Administration, John Battler was the first administrative officer of erstwhile civil Sub-Division.

This Lower Assam District covers an area of 3245 square K.Ms. and is bounded by international border i.e. Bhutan Hills in the North, Nalbari District in the East, Kamrup and Goalpara Districts in the South and Bongaigaon district in the west ([file:///E:/internet/Geographical%20 location, htm](file:///E:/internet/Geographical%20location, htm)). Today Barpeta Comprises two Sub-Division (as on 31-03-2004), twelve Blocks (as on 31-3-2004), eight Revenue Circles (as per 2001 Census), 150 numbers of Gaon Panchayats (as on 31-08-2004), 1073 villages along with 23 uninhabited (as per 2001 census) and 7 number of towns (as per 2001

census) (Statistical Handbook of Assam: 2004). As per socio economic profile of Barpeta District (vide Appendix-VI) the HDI rank is 9 and GDI rank is 10 out of 23 districts of Assam which is not at all satisfactory (excluding four districts of BTC).

The demographic profile of Barpeta District has been shown in Table No. 28

Table No. 28
Demographic Profile of Barpeta District as Per 2001 census.
Population and literacy: As per 2001 census

Nature	Number
Total Population	1647201
Total Male Population	848578
Total Female Population	798623
Sex Ratio	1000 : 941
Population Density	506
Total literate Persons	752682
Literate (Male)	448021
Literate (Female)	304661
Literacy Rate (Male)	64.83%
Literacy Rate (Female)	47.07%
Total literacy Rate	56.24%

Source: Census of India 2001, Part Assam Series: 19.

Barpeta district is the fourth largest populated district of Assam. At the district level, the highest overall literacy rate is in Jorhat (76.3 percent) followed by Sibsagar (74.5 percent) and Kamrup (74.2 percent). On the other hand the lowest literacy rate is recorded in Dhubri (48.2 percent) and the literacy rate in Barpeta is 56.2 percent ranking the position 20 out of 23 districts not at all satisfactory. As

Barpeta district is one of the significant Muslim dominated districts of Assam we would like to present Muslim population and literacy rate as per 2001 census in Table No. 29

Table No. 29
Muslim population and literacy rate in Barpeta district: As per 2001 census.

Nature	Number
Total Muslim population	977943
Total Muslim Male population	506735
Total Muslim Female population	471208
Sex Ratio	1000 : 929
Total literate Persons (Muslim)	320754
Literate: Male (Muslim) Population	199997
Literate: Female (Muslim) Population	120757
Literacy Rate: Male (Muslim)	50.70%
Literacy Rate: Female (Muslim)	33.28%
Total literacy Rate : (Muslims)	42.35%

Source : 1. Census of India 2001, Part Assam Series: 19.
2. Statistical Handbook fo Assam, 2003-04 & 2006-07.

It is found from Table 29 that sex-ratio of the Muslim population of Barpeta District is lower as compared to sex-ratio of the overall population of the district. It has not only reduced the number of Muslim women population but also has reduced the status of women. As far as literacy rate of the Muslim population is concerned it is seen that there is 13.89% literacy gap of the Muslims with overall population of the district. The literacy rate of all male population of the district is 64.83% and if we compare this with Muslim male's literacy rate it would come to 14.0% literacy gap of the Muslim male's literacy. It can

safely state that Muslims are backward in educational level. The female literacy gap of the Muslims with overall population of the district is 13.79%, which also signifies backwardness of Muslim female education. If we compare the literacy rate of Muslim population of Barpeta district with the literacy rate of the people belonging to Hindus we can experience a wider gap between the two religious groups which has been shown in Table 30.

Table No. 30

Literacy Rate of Hindus & Muslims: Barpeta District, As per 2001 census

Literacy Rate: Hindus	Literacy Rate: Muslims
Total Literacy Rate: 74.51 %	Total Literacy Rate: 42.35%
Male Literacy Rate: 83.78%	Male Literacy Rate: 50.70%
Female Literacy Rate: 64.85%	Female Literacy Rate: 33.28%

Source : Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2003-04 & 2006-07.

Thus it can be said that there is wider gap between the two dominant groups of the district. It is worthwhile to mention here that education is directly linked to socio-economic and cultural development. Apart from this, educational development is utmost necessity in connection with controlling growth of population. If a dominant cultural group is neglected in connection with achieving proper education how can we expect a balanced growth rate along with a better socio-economic condition from a particular community. We would focus these significant issues in details along with highlighting the role of women in family society as well as in the political process.

We have already pointed out in the earlier analysis that Barpeta District covers an area of 3245 sq.kms in which the total Char area is 366.5 sq. kms. Thus, 11.30 percent area of the district is under Char areas covering the 16.34% of Char population as the Char population stands at 268344, having sex ratio of 948 and density of population is 732.

As per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-2003, conducted in the 'Char Areas' (riverine areas) of Assam, we can experience 277 char villages of Barpeta District (vide : Appendix-III), under 5 numbers of Community Development Blocks and 31 Gaon Panchayats within one Civil Sub-Division comprising 36,655 hectares of land and 268,344 population. Out of the total population, the number of male population is 137,708 and female population is 130,636 covering 45,792 total number of family. The total literate persons are 47,309 and the number of illiterate persons are 221,035, being overall literacy rate is 17.63 percent as well as 67 percent family in average are living below poverty line (Socio-Economic Survey: 2002-2003). It is worthwhile to mention here that barring a very few almost all the char villages of the district are Muslim dominated villages belonging to immigrant Muslims. Two hundred seventy seven (277) char villages of Barpeta district are under the jurisdiction of five (5) Char Development Block. They are - (1) Mandia Development Block, (2) Barbaradi Development Block (3) Chenga Development Block (4) Keutkuchi Development Block (5) Rupshi Development Block. Eighteen Gaon Panchayats under Mandia Development Block have covered one hundred sixty four char villages, two Gaon Panchayats under Barbaradi Development Block have covered twenty-three char villages, Chenga Development Block covering four Gaon Panchayats having forty-two char villages, Rupshi Development Block having six Gaon Panchayats forty-two char villages

and Keutkuchi Development Block covering just one Gaon Panchayat having six char villages.

Socio-Economic Profile of Surveyed Char villages:

Though we have shown socio-economic and demographic profile of selected 18 char villages (see Appendix-V) of Barpeta District yet it is our attempt to present in brief the socio-economic profile of our surveyed char villages as per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2003 and Census of India, 2001 in the following way:

Char Village No. 1 Islampur: The char village Islampur is under Bhatnapaty Gaon Panchyat. The village is situated under Mandia Development Block. As per Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-003, of Char Areas Assam, the total population of the village is 312 comprising 162 males and 150 females. The sex-ratio is 925. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.31 and the literacy rate is 17.63 percent. According to census, 2001, the population of Islampur is 457, out of which male population is 245 and female population is 212 having a sex ratio of 865. The literacy rate is 25.7 percent out of which male-female literacy rate is 37.3 percent and 12.1 percent respectively and the gender gap in literacy is 25.2 percent.

Char Village No. 2 Jahanar Ghola: Jahanar Glola is under Mandia Development Block and it is under Baghbar Gaon Panchayat. The total population is 366 out of which male population is 366 out of which male population is 182 and female population is 184 having a sex ratio of 1010 as per Socio-economic survey Report, 2002-2003, char areas of Assam. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.65 along with literacy rate of 19.13 percent. But according to Census 2001, the total population of Jahanar Ghola is 349 having 179 male population and 170 female population. The sex ratio is 949 and the

literacy rate is 20.6 percent in which the percentage of male literacy is 31.2 and female literacy is 8.7 and the gender gap in literacy rate is 22.5 percent.

Char Village No. 3. Aligaon Pathar: The char village Aligaon Pathre is within the jurisdiction of Mandia Development Block. The village is under the Gaon Panchayat of Manikpur. As per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03 char area of Assam, the total number of persons of the village is 437 comprising 222 males and 215 females having a sex ratio of 968. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 66.67 together with literacy rate of 17.62 percent. But, according to census 2001, the total persons of Aligaon Pathar is 153 out of which males are 80 and females are 73 having a sex-ratio of 912. The percentage of literacy is 21.4 out of which the literacy rate of male is 34.4 percent and the literacy rate of females is 7.1 percent along with a gender gap in literacy is 27.3 percent, which is extremely wider.

Char Village No. 4. Gulia: The Char village Gulia is situated at Lashunga Gaon Panchayat under Rupshi Development Block. As per socio-economic Survey Report 2002-03, Char areas of Assam, the total population of this Char village is 430 out of which 225 are males and 205 are females having a sex-ratio of 911 along with the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 70.83. The percentage of literacy rate is 17.44. But, as per Census 2001, the total number of persons is 1965 and the male-female break-up is 872 and 823 respectively having a sex ratio of 943. According to 2001 census, the percentage of literacy rate is 44.1 in which the percentage of male literacy rate is 51 and female literacy rate is 36.5 having a gender gap is 14.5.

Char Village No. 5. Sarudia: The Char village Sarudia is under Dakhin Gadhuni Panchayat and Chenga Development Block having a small number of population of 247 comprising 117 males and 130 females with a sex-ratio of 1111 as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 66.67 and the percentage of literacy rate is 17.41. But according to 2001 Census, the total population is 275 having 144 males and 131 with a sex ratio of 909. The overall percentage of literacy rate is 60 percent out of which the literacy rate of males is 64.8 percent and females' literacy rate is 54.6 percent having a gender gap in literacy is 10.2 percent, which, of course, not at all disturbing in comparison to other four char villages as mentioned earlier.

Char Village No. 6. Balajan: The Char village Balajan is under Baghbar Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block. The total population 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 with a literacy rate of 16.85 percent. But Census 2001 gives slightly different picture relating to total population. According to 2001 census, the total population of Balajan is 619. The male population is 315 and females are 304 with a sex ratio of 965. The percentage of literacy rate is 38.2 in which the rate of males' literacy is 46.4 percent and females' rate of literacy is 29.4 percent with a gender gap in literacy is 17.1 percent.

Char Village No. 7. Morabajh: The char village Morabajh is within Baghbar Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block and the total persons of this village is 725 having 363 males and 362 females along with sex ratio of 997 and the percentage of family living below the

poverty line is 73.13. The literacy rate of this village is 17.24 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey 2002-03. But according to 2001 Census, the total population of Morabjh is 1192 having 624 males and 568 females with a sex ratio of 910. The literacy rate of this village is 35.9 percent. The literacy rate of males is 44.8 percent and the females' literacy rate is 26.2 percent having a gender gap in literacy rate is 18.6 percent.

Char Village No. 8. Jahanar Gaon: Jahanar Gaon is another char village which is under the jurisdiction of Baghbor Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block and the total population of this village is 805 with 408 males and 397 females along with a sex ratio of 973 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.12 along with the literacy rate is 19.63 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char areas of Assam. According to census 2001, the total population of this village is 1306 having 675 males and 631 females with a sex ratio of 934. The literacy rate is 31.1 percent having males' literacy rate is 39.2 percent and females' literacy rate is 22.4 percent with a gender gap in literacy rate 16.9 percent.

Char Village No. 9. Bamundongra: The char village Bamundongra under Bamundongra Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block and the total persons 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 census 2001, the total population of this village is 1994, which is much more than the total population conducted by Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03. The males are 1023 and females are 971 out of 1994. The literacy rate is 48.8 percent having males literacy

rate is 57.9 percent and females rate of literacy is 38.6 percent along with a gender gap in literacy rate is 19.3 percent. Though there is gender gap in literacy yet the overall rate of literacy not at all too much dismal in comparison to other char villages as mentioned earlier.

Char Village No. 10. Todhara Gaon: As per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03 Char Areas of Assam, the char village Todhara Gaon is also within Mandia Development Block but the village is under Dighirpar Gaon Panchayat. The total persons of this village is 573 having 298 males and 275 females along with a sex ratio of 922. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 65.98 and the literacy rate of this village is 19.02 percent. But the total population of this village is 1463 as per census 2001 out of which males are 765 and females are 698 having a sex ratio of 912. The literacy rate is 41.1 percent having males literacy rate is 52.7 percent and females literacy rate is 27.9 percent with a gender gap of 24.8 percent in literacy rate.

Char Village No. 11. Udmari: Udmari is a Char village of Sonapur Gaon Panchayat under Rupshi Development Block. According to Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03, Char areas of Assam, the total population of this village is 825 out of which males are 425 and females are 400. The sex ratio is 941 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 73.61 along with a literacy rate of 18.79 percent. But, as per Census 2001, the total number of person of this village is 1493 comprising 777 males and 716 females having a sex ratio of 921. The literacy rate of this village is 48.2 percent. The male literacy rate is 55.6 percent and females literacy rate is 40.2 percent with a gender gap of literacy rate is 15.4 percent.

Char Village No. 12. Silashi Pather: Salashi Pather is under Baghbor Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block and the total persons are 925 with 463 males and 462 females with a sex ratio of 997 and the percentage of family living below the poverty line is 67.25 having a literacy rate of 17.08 percent as per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03 Char areas of Assam. But, the Census 2001 gives us a different picture regarding the total population of this village. In fact, the total population of this village is 1580 with 805 males and 775 females, which is much more in comparison to Socio-Economic Survey of 2002-03. Probably, this is due to erosion of some areas of this village. The sex ratio is 962 and the overall literacy rate is 24.1 percent with males literacy rate is 30.4 percent and females literacy rate is 17.3 percent with a gender gap in literacy of 13.1 percent.

Char Village No. 13. Baghbor Gaon: The char village Baghbor Gaon is under Baghbor Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block with a population of 1935 out of which males are 975 and females are 960. The sex ratio is 984 and the literacy rate is 17.83 percent. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 68.09 as per Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam. But according to Census 2001, the total persons of this char Gaon is 941 having males literacy rate is 47.4 percent and females' literacy rate is 30.4 percent with a gender gap in literacy of 17.0 percent.

Char Village No. 14. Niz Baghbor: Char village Niz Baghbor is also within the jurisdiction of Baghbor Gaon Panchayat and Mandia Development Block. As per Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03, char areas of Assam, the total population of this village is 2032 with 1025 males and 1007 females along with a sex ratio of 982. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 66.05 and the

literacy rate is 17.52 percent. But, according to Census 2001, the total population is 3204, which is much more than the total population of 2032 conducted by Survey Report of 2002-03. The total male population is 1644 and female population is 1560 with a sex ratio of 948. The literacy rate is 42.6 percent in which males' literacy rate is 56.9 percent and females' literacy rate is just 27.4 percent having a wider gender gap in literacy of 29.6 percent.

Char Village No. 15. Char Saria: The Char village Char Saria is under the Gaon Panchayat of Guliza and Rupshi Development Block and as per Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam, the 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 is 70.94. The literacy rate is 17.61 percent. But, according to Census 2001, the total population is 1248 with males 673 and 575 females and the sex ratio is 854. The literacy rate is 24.2 percent with male literacy rate 32.6 percent and female literacy rate 14.6 along with a gender gap in literacy rate of 18.1 percent.

Char Village No. 16. Major Char: The char village Major Char is under the Gaon Panchayat of Dakhin Godhuni and Chenga Development Block. As per Socio-Economic Survey, 2002-03, Char Areas of Assm, the total persons are 1123 out of which males are 563 and females are 560 with a sex ratio of 994. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 66.84 percent and the literacy rate is 17.63 percent. According to Census 2001 the population of this village is 1056 with 548 males and 508 females having a sex ratio of 927. The literacy rate is 14.4 percent having males literacy rate 19.1 percent and females literacy rate 9.2 percent along with gender gap in literacy rate of 9.8 percent.

Char Village No. 17. Dighir Pather: The char village Dighir Pather is within the Gaon Panchayat of Dighir Pam and Mandia Development Block. As per Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03, Char Areas of Assam, the total population of this char village is 2517 having 1312 male population and 1205 female population and the sex ratio is 912. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 66.98 and the literacy rate is 18.08 percent. But, according to Census 2001, the total population of this village is 1667 out of which males are 860 and females are 807 and the sex ratio is 938. The literacy rate is 35.8 percent in which males literacy rate is 45.3 percent and females rate of literacy is 25.8 percent with a gender gap in literacy rate is 19.5 percent.

Char Village No. 18. Dakhin Godhuni: The char village Dakhin Godhuni is within the Gaon Panchayat of Dakhin Godhuni and Chenga Development Block. According to the Socio-Economic Survey Report, 2002-2003, Char Area of Assam the village has 1325 persons with 675 males and 650 females and its sex ratio is 962. The percentage of family living below the poverty line is 66.81 and the literacy rate is 17.58 percent. But, according to census 2001 the total persons of this village is 2338 out of which male population is 1216 and female population is 1122 with a sex ratio of 922. The overall literacy rate is 21.6 percent in which males literate rate is 28.6 percent and females literacy rate is 14.4 percent and the gender gap in literacy rate is 14.2 percent.

Now we would like to analysis the profile of three important blocks of Barpeta District of Char areas of Assam.

4.3.1 Profile of the Block Mandia:

Mandia Development Block is one of the largest Blocks of Assam. The Block came into existence in the year 1952. There are 18 Gaon Panchayats under the jurisdiction of this Block.

The Block also covers 164 Char villages having the population of 167429 as per socio-economic survey report, 2002 – 03, Government of Assam. The male-female break up is 84810 (males) and 82619 (females) having a sex ratio of 974. The total area of Char villages under this Block is 26222 hectares. Of this, cultivable land is 17690 hectares and uncultivable land is 8506 hectares. Thus, total cultivable land is 67.46 percent. The literacy rate covering 164 Char villages under the Mandia development block is 17.64 percent. There are 179 lower primary schools, 50 middle schools, 20 high schools, 1 higher secondary school and two colleges. There are 5 Public Health Centres and 16 Sub-Centres so far as medical facilities are concerned.

There are 28942 numbers of family covering 164 Char villages under the Mandia Development Block. Of this, 19449 numbers of family are below the poverty line having the percentage of 67.20. Out of 11.30% Char areas of Barpeta District, 8.08% Char areas are covered by Mandia Development Block along with density of population per sq.km. is 638.

4.3.2. Profile of the Block Rupshi:

Rupshi Development Block came in to existence in the year 1960. There are forty-two Char villages and six Gaon Panchayats under the jurisdiction of Rupshi Development Block having the total Char population of 31,264. The total number of male population is 16987 and female population is 14277 having the sex ratio of 840. The total

land (in hectares) is 3745 and out of this total land, cultivable land is 2504 hectares along with 1241 hectares uncultivable area of land. Thus it is said that 66.86 percent of total land belongs to cultivable land. The literacy rate of these 44 Char villages comprising this block is 19.02 percent. There are 37 lower primary schools, 13 middle schools, 3 high schools having no higher secondary schools and colleges. Medical facilities are totally absent in these 44 Char villages. There is no irrigation facilities too. Out of 5642 total number of family 4051 families are living below the poverty line having the rate of poverty 71.80 percent. The total percentage of Char areas under Barpeta District is 11.30% as mentioned earlier. Of this, 1.15% Char areas are covered by Rupshi Development Block having the density of population per sq. km. is 835.

4.3.3. Profile of the Block Chenga:

Chenga Development Block was created in the year 1963. There are 42 Char villages along with 4 Gaon Panchayats comprising the total population of 41159. The male-female breakup is 20864 (males) and 20295 (females) having the sex ratio of 972. The total area is 5243 hectares and out of this total area 3530 hectares are cultivable land and 1703 hectares are uncultivable land. Thus the percentage of cultivable land is 67.33. The literacy rate of this block is 17.51 percent. There are 41 lower primary schools, 10 middle schools, 4 high schools having no higher secondary schools and colleges under the 42 Char villages covering Chenga Development Block. The medical facilities are extremely dismal as there is not a Public Health Centre and dispensary created so far in these villages except a Sub-Centre. Out of 11.30% Char areas of the district Chenga Development Block has covered 1.61% Char areas having the density of population is 785. The absence of

irrigable land also creates obstacles, which has certainly broadened the burden of poor cultivators. There are 6909 numbers of total families in these Char villages covering the Block. Out of these total families, 4628 numbers of families are below the poverty line having the percentage of 67.

Before going to focus the role of women in family, society and the political process in the Development Blocks of Mandia, Rupshi and Chenga covering the Char areas of Barpeta Districts in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, we would like to throw some lights on the question of womenfolk playing their part in family, society and the political process.

4.4 Women in family, society and political process in selected Blocks:

According to Kasema Khatun (1997) womenfolk of Char areas are not allowed to go to nearby houses after sunset. She has also remarked that young girls are prohibited from going to 'Ghats' of the river in the evening (Ibid: 1997). It has also been observed in these 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 areas. Among the Muslims of Char villages the marriage of very young girls is still quite prevalent as mentioned earlier. In fact, marriage of female Char dwellers at the age of 12 to 16 years is commonly noticed. Polygamy is also allowed in the Char villages like other Muslim dominated societies. Joint family system can also be noticed in these areas. The practice of purdah is another custom among the womenfolk of Char areas. The birth of a girl is also

considered as an unfortunate and unpleasant event in the Muslim families of Char areas as like as Hindu families. As per Islamic rules a woman is entitled to possess land as well as the maternal property. Of course, these are maintained and looked after by their male relatives. 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 of Char areas of these villages fail to make significant impact on their lives.

The general observations of Kasema Khatun (1997) have been borne out by our field studies of selected Char Villages of the three Development Blocks, viz., Mandia, Ruposhi and Chenga. In our sample all the respondents of whom majority were less than of thirty (30) years of age, were married and Muslims (See Table No.31). Within family the women members generally had low autonomy. In our questionnaire we have grouped different indicators as low, moderate and high women's autonomy according to a scale (7 no.).

This 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 of 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; Others = 0. In the case of freedom of movement, the codes are: Yes = 2; No = 0. The total autonomy scores range from 0 to 16. This has been classified as low (0-5), moderate (6-11) and high (12-16).

Accordingly, 84.17% was found to have low autonomy in decision making and a zero percentage of high decision making in the surveyed Char Villages (See Table No.32). Almost all the women respondents

were housewives (90.83%) with the remaining engaged in agricultural works. 78.06% returned with no monthly income, 21.67% having income in between 1000-2000 and 0.28% having income in between (2000-5000). Expenditure pattern revealed a pattern of subsistence living and none of the women respondents owned land (See Table 33). Without exception all the women respondents took decision in consultation with their husbands (See Table No.34). Given this it was surprising to find that 96.94% of women respondents refused to find any gender discrimination in family (See Table 35). It may be they did not have any clear idea of gender discrimination at all. We had distinguished five stages of household socio-economic status. 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 etc. This index scores range from (1) 1-8: Low SLI, (2) 9-15: Lower Middle SLI, (3) 16-22: Middle SLI, (4) 23-32: Upper Middle SLI; (5) 32-48: High SLI.

Table No.31

Social background

Name of Block	Name of Village	Age		Marital Status		Religion				Women's Education			
		<30	>30	Married	Un-Married	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Others	Illiterate	Below 7	Above 7	HS & Above
Mandia	Dighir Pathar	6	14	20			20			16	4		
	Niz Baghbar	9	11	20			20			13	4	2	1
	Baghbar Gaon	7	13	20			20			14	6		
	Silashi Pather	11	9	20			20			17	3		
	Morabajh	5	15	20			20			15	5		
	Jahanar Gaon	4	16	20			20			14	6		
	Aligaon Pather	9	11	20			20			19	1		
	Islampur	9	11	20			20			15	3	2	
	Jahanar Ghola	4	16	20			20			16	3	1	
	Balajan	6	14	20			20			19	1		
	Todhera Gaon	14	6	20			20			18	2		
	Bamundongra	9	11	20			20			14	6		
Ruposhi	Udmari	15	5	20			20			17	2	1	
	Galia	14	6	20			20			14	3	2	1
	Charsaria	10	10	20			20			14	4	2	
Chenga	Sarudia	11	9	20			20			16	3	1	
	Majar Char	9	11	20			20			18	2		
	Dakhin Godhuni	12	8	20			20			16	4		
Total	164	196	360			360			285	62	11	2	

Source : Field Survey

(156)

Table No.32

Women's Autonomy in decision-making

Name of Block	Name of Village	Women's Autonomy		
		Low	Moderate	High
Mandia	Dighir Pathar	15	5	
	Niz Baghbar	15	5	
	Baghbar Gaon	15	5	
	Silashi Pather	18	2	
	Morabajh	19	1	
	Jahanar Gaon	17	3	
	Aligaon Pather	19	1	
	Islampur	17	3	
	Jahanar Ghola	18	2	
	Balajan	19	1	
	Todhera Gaon	18	2	
	Bamundongra	16	4	
Ruposhi	Udmari	16	4	
	Galia	16	4	
	Charsaria	15	5	
Chenga	Sarudia	16	4	
	Majar Char	18	2	
	Dakhin Godhuni	16	4	
Total		303	57	

Source : Field Survey

Table No.33

Economic status of Women's Members of Family

Name of Block	Name of Village	Occupation							Monthly Income					Monthly Expenditure			Land Ownership	
		Agriculture	Artisan	Craftsman	Perm. Labour	H. Wife	Petty Trade	D Wage labour	Nil	Rs.1000 - Rs.2000	Rs.2000 - Rs.5000	Rs.5000 & above	Rs.1000 - Rs.2000	Rs.2000 - Rs.5000	Rs.5000 & above	Yes	No	
Mandia	Dighir Pathar	1				19			17	2	1		19	1			20	
	Niz Baghbar	1				19			14	6			19	1			20	
	Baghbar Gaon	1				19			16	4			20				20	
	Silashi Pather	2				18			14	6			20				20	
	Morabajh					18		2	16	4			19	1			20	
	Jahanar Gaon	2				17		1	15	5			20				20	
	Aligaon Pather	2				17		1	15	5			17	3			20	
	Islampur					20			17	3			13	7			20	
	Jahanar Ghola	1				19			20				19	1			20	
	Balajan	2				16		2	18	2			17	3			20	
	Todhera Gaon					19		1	14	6			15	5			20	
	Bamundongra					20			17	3			12	8			20	
	Ruposhi	Udmari					20			16	4			13	7			20
Galia						20			14	6			15	5			20	
Charsaria		2				18			16	4			13	7			20	
Chenga	Sarudia	1				16		3	16	4			16	4			20	
	Majar Char					19		1	15	5			12	8			20	
	Dakhin Godhuni	5				13		2	11	9			10	10			20	
Total					327		13	281	78	1		289	71			360		

Source : Field Survey

(158)

Table No.34
Decision Making

Name of Block	Name of Village	Decision Consulted by Husband	
		Yes	No
Mandia	Dighir Pathar		20
	Niz Baghbar		20
	Baghbar Gaon		20
	Silashi Pather		20
	Morabajh		20
	Jahanar Gaon		20
	Aligaon Pather		20
	Islampur		20
	Jahanar Ghola		20
	Balajan		20
	Todhera Gaon		20
Bamundongra		20	
Ruposhi	Udmari		20
	Galia		20
	Charsaria		20
Chenga	Sarudia		20
	Majar Char		20
	Dakhin Godhuni		20
Total			360

Source : Field Survey

Table No.35
Gender Discrimination in Family

Name of Block	Name of Village	Gender Discrimination in Family	
		Yes	No
Mandia	Dighir Pathar		20
	Niz Baghbar	2	18
	Baghbar Gaon		20
	Silashi Pather	1	19
	Morabajh		20
	Jahanar Gaon		20
	Aligaon Pather		20
	Islampur	2	18
	Jahanar Ghola	1	19
	Balajan		20
	Todhera Gaon		20
Ruposhi	Bamundongra		20
	Udmari	1	19
	Galia	1	19
Chenga	Charsaria		20
	Sarudia	1	19
	Majar Char	1	19
	Dakhin Godhuni	1	19
Total		11	349

Source : Field Survey

In terms of this criteria 85.28% of the households of women respondents had low economic status and the rest belong to the lower middle category (See Table No.36).

It is not unnatural to expect that women are unlikely to play a positive social role when they are largely illiterate. It was found in the surveyed char villages 79.17% were illiterate, 17.22% studied upto below seven, 3.05% studied upto HS and 0.56% HS and above. This largely explains why 86.67% had very low exposure to mass media. Exposure to mass media derived 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 as having moderate exposure and if she responded yes to either one or no items, she was coded low exposure. Remarkably there was not a single case of high exposure to mass media (See Table No.37). Consistently our respondents 84.17% showed a low level of autonomy on a three point scale (description of variation No.7). There was no case of high women's autonomy (See Table No.32).

Table No.36

Household Socio-Economic Status

Name of Block	Name of Village	Household Socio-economic Status				
		Low	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle	High
Mandia	Dighir Pathar	18	2	-		
	Niz Baghbar	17	3	-		
	Baghbar Gaon	16	4			
	Silashi Pather	18	2			
	Morabajh	18	2			
	Jahanar Gaon	17	3			
	Aligaon Pather	19	1			
	Islampur	16	4			
	Jahanar Ghola	19	1			
	Balajan	18	2			
	Todhera Gaon	18	2			
	Bamundongra	16	4			
Ruposhi	Udmari	16	4			
	Galia	15	5			
	Charsaria	16	4			
Chenga	Sarudia	16	4			
	Majar Char	18	2			
	Dakhin Godhuni	16	4			
Total		307	53			

Source : Field Survey

(162)

Table No.37
Exposure to Mass Media

Name of Block	Name of Village	Exposure of Mass Media		
		High	Moderate	Low
Mandia	Dighir Pathar		2	18
	Niz Baghbar		5	15
	Baghbar Gaon		2	18
	Silashi Pather		1	19
	Morabajh		1	19
	Jahanar Gaon		2	18
	Aligaon Pather		2	18
	Islampur		2	18
	Jahanar Ghola		3	17
	Balajan		3	17
	Todhera Gaon		2	18
	Bamundongra		2	18
Ruposhi	Udmari		5	15
	Galia		4	16
	Charsaria		4	16
Chenga	Sarudia		3	17
	Majar Char		3	17
	Dakhin Godhuni		2	18
Total			48	312

Source : Field Survey

All the women respondents were asked 5 questions relating to political participation. These were marked as questions No.15 to 20 in the questionnaire ranging from whether the respondents cast their vote in election, whether they cast their votes without any influence, whether they took part in the activity of panchayat, whether they attended the meeting of the Gram Sabha, whether they attended political meeting, whether they were active member of political party . If the respondent responded 'Yes' all the questions from Question No.15 to 20 she was scored 18 having 3 points for each question and it has been classified as high participation in political process. If the respondent responded 'Yes' any three questions from Question No.15 to 20 she was scored 9 and classified as moderate participation in political process. If the respondent responded 'No' all the questions from 15 to 20 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 criteria 81.67% showed low participation in political process with the remaining showing moderate participation (See Table No.38).

However, while interviewing selected respondents it came to our notice 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. This evidence of political activism is in sharp contrast with a preponderantly low level of political awareness and participation as revealed from our survey data. The explanation may lie at the fact of insecure identity and sometimes even of nationality of the inhabitants of the Char areas. Participation in politically mobilized meetings may be a way of bargaining for political support in their quest for security.

Of all the respondents 18.61% were members of Self Help Groups (see Table No.39). This low figure of SHG membership was partly due to late introduction of SHG in Assam and partly to remote and inhospitable nature of the char area making the presence of NGOs a rare experience. In many cases the Block Offices were run from remote locations due to unstable climatic conditions and geo-physical constraints. Nevertheless we found that all the indicators of development related positively to the members of SHGs showing that a little bit of education, slightly higher income, a better awareness could be associated with the members of SHGs. However, there is no positive proof that SHGs have any direct contribution to women's empowerment as it is too early to discover such connection. But generally we seem to find a negative picture of women's empowerment in the char areas of the Brahmaputra Valley when we take into account the indicators of social, economic and political empowerment (see Figure No.4,5 & 6).

Table No.38
Level of Political Participation

Name of Block	Name of Village	Political Participation		
		High	Moderate	Low
Mandia	Dighir Pathar		3	17
	Niz Baghbar		5	15
	Baghbar Gaon		2	18
	Silashi Pather		4	16
	Morabajh		2	18
	Jahanar Gaon		3	17
	Aligaon Pather		5	15
	Islampur		5	15
	Jahanar Ghola		4	16
	Balajan		4	16
	Todhera Gaon		2	18
	Bamundongra		4	16
Ruposhi	Udmari		4	16
	Galia		5	15
	Charsaria		4	16
Chenga	Sarudia		4	16
	Majar Char		4	16
	Dakhin Godhuni		2	18
Total			66	294

Source : Field Survey

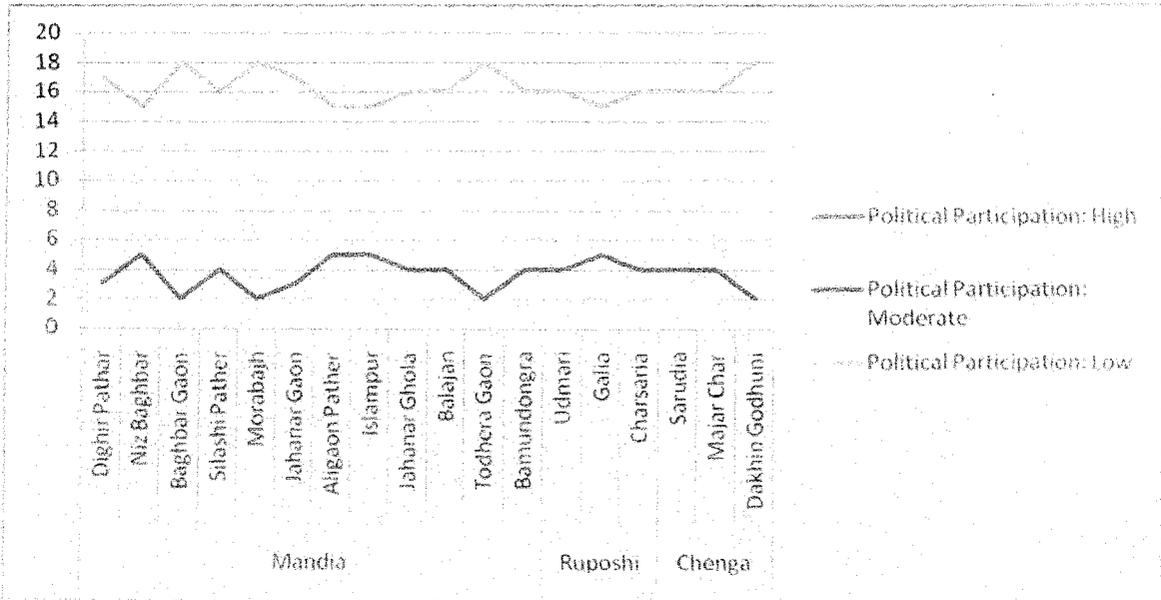
Table No.39
Membership of Self Help Group (SHG)

Name of Block	Name of Village	Member of SHG	
		Yes	No
Mandia	Dighir Pathar		20
	Niz Baghbar	6	14
	Baghbar Gaon		20
	Silashi Pather	5	15
	Morabajh		20
	Jahanar Gaon		20
	Aligaon Pather	6	14
	Islampur	12	8
	Jahanar Ghola		20
	Balajan		20
	Todhera Gaon		20
	Bamundongra	7	13
	Ruposhi	Udmari	6
Galia			20
Charsaria		5	15
Chenga	Sarudia		20
	Majar Char	7	13
	Dakhin Godhuni	13	7
Total		67	293

Source : Field Survey

Figure No.4

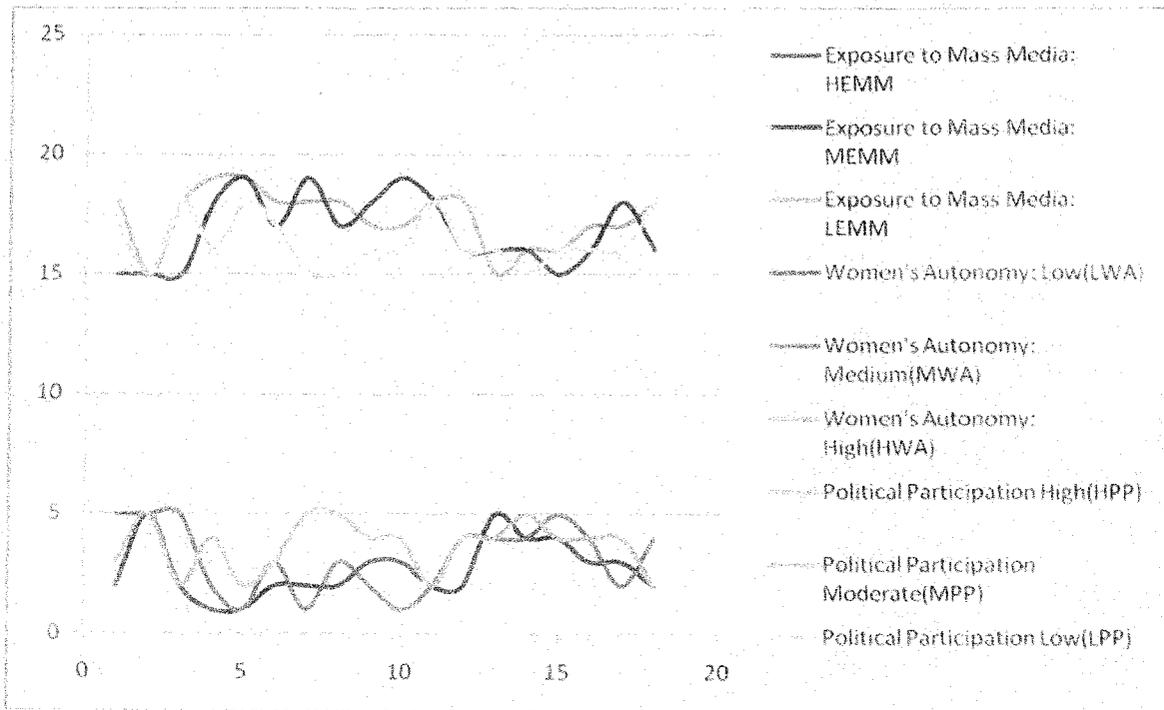
Distribution Curve of Women's Political Participation



Source : Field Survey

Figure No.5

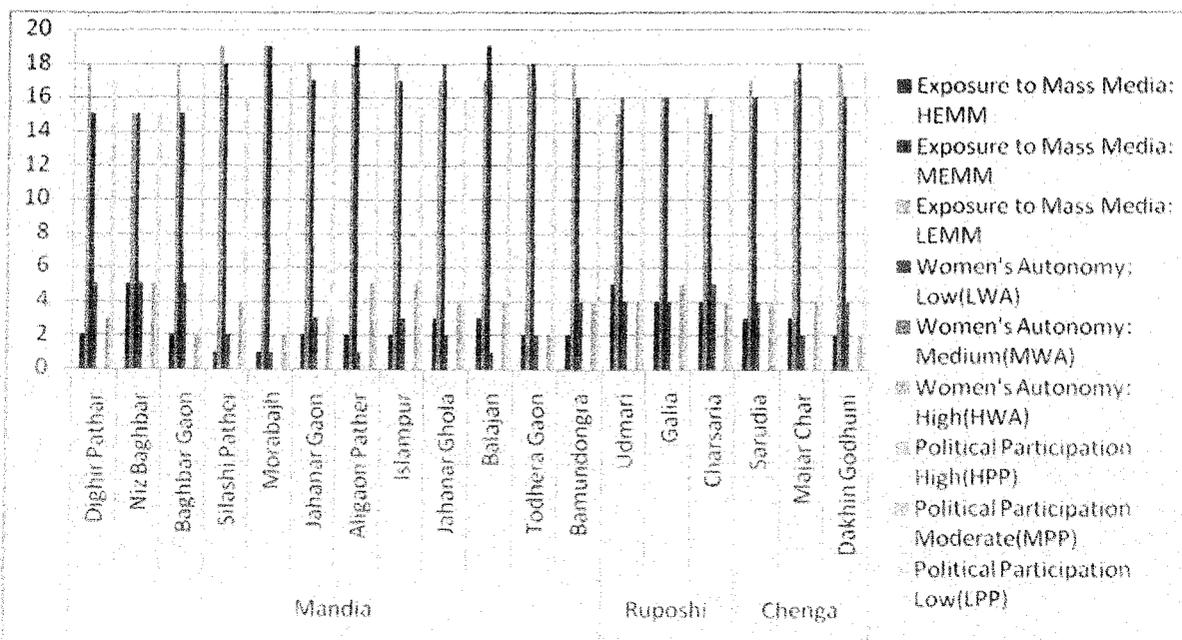
Distribution Curve of Exposure to Mass Media, Women's Autonomy & Political Participation.



Source : Field Survey

Figure No.6

Bar Diagram of Exposure to Mass Media, Women's Autonomy & Political Participation



Source : Field Survey

4.5 Conclusion

Assam Human Development Report 2003 had presented a picture of the Barpeta District the Char areas of which have been surveyed by us. Our survey has not only confirmed the main observation of the Assam Human Development Report, it has also made the picture darker with respect to the Char areas. As we know the difference between the HDI rank and the GDI rank of a particular district indicates the gender disparity in the District. Barpeta enjoys 9th rank in the HDI index and 10th rank in the GDI index out of 23 districts (including 4 districts in the Bodoland Territorial Council) of Assam. So it is a moderate achiever in terms of HDI but with low gender disparity. However, the Human Development Report did not focus separately on the Char areas. Our survey with a specific focus on the char areas has been indicative of somewhat greater gender disparity in the Char areas of the District. If it does not indicate a higher gender disparity it certainly indicates a below average HDI for the Char areas. However, the deplorable conditions of women in the Char areas of the Barpeta District would certainly require a more gender sensitive development initiative in the Char areas.