

CHAPTER - 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The question of women or gender-related issue is a significant issue in our civil society. Though women play an extremely important role in every society, yet they are deprived of rights and dignity along with facing gross negligence and discrimination as we have highlighted in the earlier analysis. In our study we tried to bring the gender perspective face to face with the vulnerabilities and deprivations of people living in the chars of the brahmaputa Valley, particularly the district of Barpeta in Assam. The present study was designed to be a field based studies in the three Development Blocks of the 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.

Through the ages, women have played an extremely important role particularly in the process of change and development. Despite their contribution, in fact, in almost all the societies, women continue to be severely disadvantaged, and even discriminated against. In the world over however it is now recognised that the socio-economic status of women in family and society continues to be inferior to men which we have shown in the second chapter through global perspective along with the importance of gender related development index as the gender development is considered central to the process of human development. Though the Government of India launched a number of schemes related to the improvement of women's status in family and in household economy it is our observation that these are not adequate in order to enhance women's position. We have also shown in chapter-II that like other parts of the country women are isolated (isolation is basically isolation from formal economic and political decision making

process at different level of Government) in Assam too, though due to non-existence of certain customs like 'Dowry' and 'Sati' Assamese women are considered to be better position. Evil practices like 'Dowry', 'Crime and violence against women' "witch hunting" etc. have already gained ground in the civil-society of Assam which has been analyzed in this chapter too. Today, gender related development index of Assam in comparison to other states of North Eastern Region is not at all encouraging which has also been analyzed in details in this chapter.

Apart from these, we have tried to provide the socio economic lives of char or riverine people of Brahmaputra Valley in general and char areas of Barpeta district in particular from political perspectives highlighting the socio economic and political awareness of womenfolk. In fact, economic and political empowerment of women belonging to any community, society and region can not be understood without taking into account the specificities of local conditions. So we considered the nature and extent of women's empowerment specifically in the char areas in the 3rd chapter. The dismal socio-economic status alongwith lower educational level and lower political awareness belonging to Muslim womenfolk of char areas rightly justified the epithet used for them: "river nomads" The Assam Tribune is justified in observing:

The female literacy rate in the State is abysmally low. Twelve districts of the State have less than 50 percent literacy rate among women. Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Darrang, Barpeta, Karbi Anglong, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon, Morigaon, Hailakandi, Goalapara, Tinsukia and Dhemaji figure among the 365 districts of the country having dismal literacy rate among women.

Total literacy in the State would be a utopian concept unless the authorities reach out to the marginalized sections living in the

char (riverine) areas and tea gardens which account for the majority of the illiterate (The Assam Tribune, Editorial, May 26, 2010).

In fact, the following are the key contributory factors relating to low socio-economic status of Muslim women of char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam:

- Poor Educational Level;
- Lower Occupational Profile;
- Socially and Economically backward areas;
- Dominant role played by the Matabbars (Dewanees);
- Lack of Medical facilities;
- Prevalence of superstitions thinking;
- Natural calamities like erosion and flood;
- Absence of land pattas in the char areas;
- Conservatism and prevalence of 'Purdah';
- Sevre poverty;

In fact, women's socio-economic status of char areas of Barpeta district is probably determined mainly by religion, purdah, conservatism alongwith low level of education, lack of opportunity, low mobility, huge domestic responsibilities together with inadequate medical facilities and absolute poverty. In this connection the observation of Sushanta Talukdar is noteworthy as he rightly observed: As the immigrant Muslim settlers continue to devise different strategies to secure their political rights.

The char areas of lower Assam remain poor. For example, a large population of legal and illegal immigrants are marked by poverty and under development. Nearly three lakhs families out of around 4.35 lakh families residing in chars are below the poverty line. The literacy rate in these areas is only 19.3 percent against the Assamese average of 64

percent. There are only 52 public health centres to serve a population of 25 lakhs. Soil erosion is a severe problem and has forced a large number of immigrant settlers to move to Guwahati or Urban areas of the State in search of employment. Those immigrant settlers who remained have demanded land settlements but the Government is yet to undertake a survey of all the char areas (S. Talukdar : 2006).

It has been observed in our surveyed char villages that Muslim women are very much active in participating in the political process via village Panchayat, Legislative Assembly and Parliament than the women of Towns or Semi Towns (as manifest from our interviews) in some Muslim dominated wards of some towns under Barpeta District yet it cannot be safely stated that Muslim women of the district want revolutionary change of the social structure. In fact, some of them are members of Krishak Sabhas (Peasant's Front), Ganatantric Mahila Semities (Progressive women's front) as information gathered through interviews yet major portion of Muslim womenfolk do not know how their acute problems will be solved and how they will be emancipated.

It is worthwhile to mention here that the deplorable socio-economic condition of Muslim women has been highlighted in various reports and studies which may correctly be justified relating to our study area too. For instance, a report by the National Commission for Women, titled 'Voice of the voiceless,' as submitted in 2000, highlighted the socio-economic condition of 60 million Muslim women and major portion of them were poor. The 75 page report contained testimonies of Muslim women of all ages, presented at public hearings in a number of states along with conducting hearings in Chennai, Jabbalpur, Calcutta, Thiruvanthapuram, Bangalore, Tezpur (Assam), Ahemdabad, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Indore, Kolhapur and Aligarh. The report rightly observed : 'Everywhere the stories were filled with pathos.

Economically, socially, educationally, and politically deprived women came out in holders (T.K. Rajalakhmi: 2000). The striking feature of the report is its stress on the fact that Muslim women are no different in their life situation from women of other communities; the report also went against getting sucked into the imagery and cultural stereotyping 'of the burqa or hijahclad Muslim women', created by the film industry. One must be wary of such over simplification and steer off cultural stereotyping because it tends to overshadow the Muslim women's contemporary realities and struggles (Ibid: 2000). The report also has rightly observed that the perpetuation of stereotypes inadvertently serves the political purpose of often presenting the status quo. The backwardness of Muslim women stems not only from the Muslim personal law or certain 'Islamic features' it is very much a product of economic circumstances as well - poverty, destitution and most important the lack of economic rights (Ibid: 2000). Muslim Women Survey conducted by Hasan and Menon (2006) also elaborately have focused the lower educational attainment alongwith lower socio-economic status and high level of political awareness relating to voters' turn out and political participation belonging to Muslim women. Contrary to stereotypes, as pointed out in section 1.5, the Muslim Society, its alleged conservative and restrictive nature and Islamic injunctions did not so put brakes before the Muslim women and cant explain why the Muslim women's participation in political process is noteworthy as compared to Hindu women in the Char areas of Barpeta District of Assam. Such stereotypes beg the question me: If the Muslim women are restrained for "social advancement" for the prevalence of "pardah - polygamy - talaq" in almost all Muslim societies why the large number of Muslim women do participate in various movements spearheaded by political parties, NGOs in the district of Barpeta ?

In fact, issues relating to social, economic and political status of India's Muslim minority community have been a matter of debate for several decades both during pre-independence and post independence period. During the pre independence period the Dalit Muslims were provided reservation facilities along with Dalit Hindus as per Government of India Act, 1935. During the post Independence period, Dr. Gopal Singh Committee (10 members comprising the committee) submitted its reports in 1983 on the issues of Minorities, Scheduled Castes, (S.C.'s), Scheduled Tribe (S.T.'s) and other weaker sections of society pointing out that 'a sense of discrimination prevailing among the minorities' along with forwarding suggestions that 'it must be eliminated, root and branch, if we want the minorities to form an effective part of the mainstream (V. Ramkrishanan : 2006).

The socio-economic status and educational level of Muslim community was further analyzed systematically in details by the Sachar Committee and in fact, the conditions of Indian Muslim highlighted by the Sachar Committee are the process of continuation of debate so far as the deprivation and discrimination of Muslim community, if there is any, is concerned. The seven member high level committee headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar was formed in March 2005 and it submitted its report in Nov. 2006 throwing light on the issues of Muslim Community particularly on three types of issues- identity, security and equality. The Sachar Committee did not analyze in details the question of women empowerment belonging to Muslim community. Apart from this, the Sachar Committee did not incorporate a woman member too. Probably M.A. Kalam (2007) rightly observed how the Committee tried to pre-empt this when the Committee says: During the Committee's interaction with women's groups, some of them seriously articulated a grievance that it did not have any woman

and impact on women. At least our study of women in 'char areas' has drawn our attention to it. Thus, they are disadvantaged: as members of the minority community, as women, as poor women, and as women of char areas. Their lives not only are positioned at the intersection of gender, class and community but also transformed due to the specificity of char areas of the mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. It would not be inappropriate to make statement that 'gender discrimination coalesces with class inequalities in perpetuating a structured disempowerment of Muslim Women' (Ibid: 2006) within the context of Assam's society in general and the char areas of Barpeta District in particular. In our study, as reported in chapter 4, we seemed to find a negative picture of women's empowerment in the char areas of the Brahmaputra Valley when we took into account the indicators of social, economic and political empowerment (see Figure No.4,5 & 6). Our survey data pointed to a vicious circle; poverty and underdevelopment leading to lower awareness and participation, which in turn contributed to further impoverishment and social backwardness. We pointed out that participatory institutions, to the extent people embrace them may loosen the hold of vicious circle of poverty, lack of consciousness and low participation. But we found that in Assam in general and char areas of Barpeta District in particular there has been slow growth of SHGs in Assam and there was problem of their extension in the Char areas. It was generally found that participatory institutions have not taken deep roots in the char areas of Barpeta District which has negative implications for women belonging to minority communities. But what was remarkable was large scale attendance of women belonging to the minority community of the char areas under study in political meetings and processions. However unless we properly understand the "space" and its implications for the life and times of char dwellers such participation may give the wrong

message and may indeed be taken as a remarkable sign of empowerment. In fact such an interpretation may also lead to questioning our findings of the field survey highlighting absolutely low awareness and low autonomy of the women in char areas. There must be a reason why such a low state of women's empowerment by measurable indices goes together with high political turnout of women. In fact under section 4 of chapter 4 we already offered a tentative explanation. The women of the char areas together with their families suffer from two interrelated insecurities: from nature and from regional politics. The Nature makes their huts and land wash away frequently and in the regional politics their citizenship is questioned by branding them as Bangladeshis. So these people always make a bee line for political support from the parties that will provide them with some kind of security. We interviewed many people including politicians and understood the motive behind such participation.

We have observed that Muslims of Char areas do fall in the category of the poor though poverty has not been acknowledged by the policy-makers. Most studies and scholars lay more emphasis on community identity than the class, gender and specific vulnerabilities of the lived areas. The lower level of women's education of char areas has certainly reduced women's earning prospects and possibilities of economic impendence. It has also contributed to lower exposure to mass media alongwith reducing women's autonomy. The low socio-economic status of womenfolk of char areas along with poor occupational profile have reduced their lives to a very deplorable condition. Apart from this, the lives of char people (both men and women) are closely bound up with the flow of river and with flooding. In fact, erosion and flood are posing a constant threat to their lives (lives of char people) which ultimately are marked by human deprivation.

As per Gender and Development approach towards gender issues direct female participation in gainful economic activity is a necessary condition for women's empowerment. But it is observed that female work participation of char areas is very poor. Agriculture and allied activities are the major occupation of female work force in such char areas; but in this respect too, the womenfolk of 18 surveyed char villages miserably fail to score on these activities. Women's right to land is also significant not only for poverty reduction among women, but also for gender mainstreaming because it can enhance women's voice, confidence, equality and autonomy. In the chars areas of our surveyed villages, women's control and access to land is almost nil.

Inclusion of women into the political process or government is one of the major components of the process of gender mainstreaming. After 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India in 1992, a new lease of life has been provided to the Panchayats which not only represent grass root of the federal structure of Indian policy but are also regarded as powerful institutions for women's empowerment. Because of one third of total seats in the Panchayats are reserved for women, so the scope of women for joining the decision making bodies has been enhanced. Reservation of one-third seats to the womenfolk of our surveyed char villages has already been implemented though in reality women's nominal participation has been observed because their husbands try to dictate and control the entire situation. Even the attendance of Gaon Sabha meeting by the womenfolk in these backward areas is simply dismal though the Gaon Sabha meetings are not held at regular intervals. The women's turn out during elections and participation in meetings organised by political parties is, of course, encouraging as has been shown in the earlier analysis. Thus it can be said that there is moderate women's political participation but

political awareness is not at all encouraging as major portion of Muslim womenfolk of surveyed villages responded that they cast their votes as directed by their husbands and other male members of their families.

Thus it can be said that the smooth running of the processes of political empowerment along with decision making power of Muslim women in the char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in general and Barpeta District in particular are hindered by many hurdles at both the individual and family level. Usually women face the following difficulties:

1. Absolute dependence on their husbands or other male family member so far as financial matter is concerned.
2. Low level of education fails to accelerate the confidence of women for which they can not interact freely and effectively.
3. The family is yet to change its outlook towards women members at different decision making bodies. Womenfolk of char areas face some other problems:

- 1) Almost all the meetings of all sorts are often held at inconvenient hours. Women members cannot attend those meeting because of the engagement of household responsibilities.
- 2) Religious strictures along with crime prone society against women also restrict women's free movement in the char areas.

Formation and expansion of activities of SHGs can play a revolutionary role in accelerating the process of women's empowerment. The initiation of formation of SHGs has been very discouraging in the char villages of Barpeta District; and where the SHGs are formed the participation coverage of rural women is very low and the striking features of these groups are not at all satisfactory in connection with bringing about any remarkable change in the overall

status of women in the char society though some of the SHGs successfully initiate (in the initial period) economic activities.

Living in the Char lands may look attractive to the distant beholders. For the inhabitants it is not the fresh air or the water-body that is important, but the day to day struggle of commuting from the char land to the mainland, of keeping themselves afloat during monsoon or rebuilding their huts after landslides. The mere existence on the char land is a struggle and an achievement in itself. The standard indices of empowerment of char-dwellers, particularly of women may project the absence of empowerment unless we try to recognize the significance of the "space" in which they live and fight out the odds. Char life requires this sensitization for development projects and schemes for women's empowerment. Abnormal conditions require innovations and ingenious solutions. The first precondition of such solutions is ensuring citizens' rights. Without this, many innovative practices of low-cost housing, accessible power supply and improved agricultural methods, as they are being experimented in neighbouring Bangladesh with foreign aid, may not be effective. However, SHGs need to be strengthened in the immediate future and gaps in support may be identified within the familiar livelihood framework of development literature and necessary corrective measures taken.