

## CHAPTER - 1

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

#### 1.1. Introduction:

The contribution of women in family, society and political process along with their status and role hold the key to the development of the State, its people and the economy. But, unfortunately, women in every society are severely disadvantaged and discriminated. Social discrimination, lower economic position, low level of educational status, inequity, poverty, violence and lack of political participation in political process have been identified as issues of grave concern to South Asian women though women belonging to higher class in South Asia enjoy higher position and status in comparison to other parts of the world. Thus the position of women in Assam like other parts of India is not at all encouraging, rather it is dismal. In fact, in some respects and in some areas (Char areas) the womenfolk belonging to some cultural groups of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam are even more disadvantaged. Of course, during the last three decades the role and contribution of women and their needs have begun to be recognized. Today, gender related issue has been given due weightage and attention in almost every society. Therefore, an attempt has been made by us to undertake a detailed study regarding women's empowerment in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam highlighting their role in family, society and political process with special reference to Barpeta District.

We have provided eight sections in this chapter including the present section. In the second section we have presented our research problem. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Section provides research gap as well as the objectives of the study on the basis of a brief review of literature. The 4<sup>th</sup> section outlines the conceptual framework. The 5<sup>th</sup> section contains research questions and hypothesis. The sixth section provides a note on

methodology. The 7<sup>th</sup> section provides details of our field work and the 8<sup>th</sup> section concludes the chapter.

### **1.2. Statement of the Problem:**

“To be a woman in South Asia is to be a non-person,” (Human Development in South Asia: 1997), who is forced to bear negligence and deprivation almost in all spheres of life. This is the only region in the world where women are far outnumbered by men (94 women for 100 men in South Asia, as compared to the global ratio of 106 women to 100 men), in a complete reversal of accepted biological trends (Anita Rampal: 2000). It indicates negligence and deprivation of women. Because of this gross social neglect of women and discrimination, Prof. Amartya Sen (2001), alongwith his academic collaborator Jean Dreze (2001) proposed and popularised the concept of “missing women” - estimated to exceed 100 million round the world - which has given us a new way of understanding and mapping the problem. Sen estimated that 74 million women are simply “missing” in South Asia. Dreze and Sen (1996) have termed the low sex ratio in India too and according to them the number of missing women in India is estimated to be between 35 and 37 million (Dreze and Sen: 1996). In fact, sex ratio is fairly good indicator of women’s status in society. Low sex ratio is synonym of lower status of women. The number of females as compared to males drastically declined throughout the 20th Century, reaching a level of 927 per 1000-1991. This means that in India’s total population of 1000 million, there are at least 36.5 million few women than would be expected on the basis of gender equality. Social discrimination and neglect of women combined with less economic position and lower educational status alongwith insignificant position in political process have lowered the status of womenfolk more vigorously. Social discrimination and neglect of women is associated with less economic

position and lower educational status. In fact, more than two – thirds of women in this region is still non-literate. Women participation in decision-making process is not at all encouraging, rather, women participation in decision making process is simply dismal, (B.K. Kunda: 2006) though women belonging to higher class in South Asia enjoy higher position and status in comparison to other states of the world (Amartya Sen: 2001). Asha Krishna Kumar (2005) has rightly observed thus: “Thirty years after the United Nations’ first meeting on women in Mexico City and 10 years after the historic Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, the U.N. is yet to come to terms with the pathetic condition of women the world over. Most of the resolutions and agreement remain only on paper, and women continue to remain voiceless, powerless and faceless.”

Fortunately enough, the women of NE India especially the tribal women enjoy a higher status (though not a dignified status in practice) in comparison to other states of Indian Union. They enjoy this high position because of egalitarian societies which they belong to. But the status of womenfolk of Assam is somewhat unique as various communities and tribes have different perceptions about the status and roles of their women. Divergent cultural and social groups have contributed to the enrichment of the beautiful social and cultural mosaic of Assam. The number of population of Assam is 26,655,528 and out of it 12,878,491 are women (Census, 2001). These womenfolk belong to various tribes and non-tribes. We can witness divergent cultural and religious groups among the non-tribal womenfolk. Thus, the status of womenfolk is supposed to vary. We would like to throw some lights on the economic and political empowerment of women in the char areas of Brahmaputra Valley with special reference to Barpeta District of Assam.

As per Assam State Char Areas Development Authority, 1997, total population of "Char Areas" was 21 lakhs covering 2089 "Char Villages" from Sadiya to Dhubri under 56 no. of Community Development Blocks of 21 Civil Sub-Divisions within 14 districts comprising 2.39 lakh hectare of land and out of these total population 13.6% were literate and 75% people in average were living below the poverty line. Mention may be made here that nearly 80% people belong to religious minority (Muslims) and around 95% people of these 80% Muslim population belong to "Immigrants Muslims". These immigrants Muslims are also regarded as "Charua Muslims".

In order to implement Developmental Schemes in these areas, the Govt. of Assam had set up the Assam State Char Areas Development Authority in the year 1984. Subsequently, the Authority was converted to full fledged Directorate in 1996 in the name of "Directorate of Char Areas Development, Assam." (Economic Survey, Assam: 2004 - 2005). According to 2001 census, total population of Assam is 26655528 and the percentage of Muslim population is 30.92 and the number of Muslim population is 8240611 and it covers 6% total Muslim in India. Out of 27 districts of Assam more than 50% population belongs to religious minority in six districts including the district of Barpeta and more than 30% Muslim population (substantial Muslim population) covers 10 districts of Assam out of 27 districts and number of Muslim population of SMP districts is 6,430,924 and percent of Muslims in SMP districts is 51 (Bose: 2005). Total population of Barpeta as per 2001 census is 1647201 out of which 977943 belongs to the religious minority and major portion of these population reside in the Char areas of Brahmaputra or its tributaries. Out of these 977943 Muslim population of Barpeta district around half of the population belongs to womenfolk. Major portion of these Muslim womenfolk are residents of either the chars of Godhuni, Jailarchar, Gandhirchar,

Duramari, Tarabarirchar, Kholabanda, Puthimari Char etc. under Boguriguri Mouza or the residents of Nichandir Char, Moukhuwar Char, Uzir Char, Alopai Char, Kadamtala, Dharmapur, Deuldir Char etc. under the jurisdiction of Baghbar Mouza. As the major portion of population in the Char areas of Brahmaputra valley of Assam belongs to religious minority it would be our modest attempt through this study to focus on the economic and political empowerment of Muslim women in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with special reference to char areas of the Barpeta district.

In fact, in the 1990s, gender index has become a crucial criteria of assessment not only for the World Bank but also for the Human Development Report. Though Tharu and Niranjana (1994) have correctly remarked "Women are suddenly everywhere" and we can witness much celebrated success of "Women's micro-credit programmes" (Kunda: 2004) yet, we can witness through random survey that no remarkable change has been made relating to the socio-economic, educational and political status of women in some char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam specially in the char areas of Barpeta District. Hence, the need of the study.

Women empowerment has attracted due attention from social scientists for right reasons. Half of the population of our contemporary society is womenfolk. By ignoring the role of women in developmental issues, we cannot think of healthy society. Real economic growth can be known better through gender approach. It is argued that women's economic participation is known to be related to improved social status. Moreover, it is also through literacy, that socio-economic status may be enhanced. Improved socio-economic status enhances and widens political awareness. We propose to study these aspects and answer some related questions. In this connection, our study is also expected

to make some theoretical contributions to conceptual framework of studying women issues in the context of Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with special reference to Barpeta District. We also propose to use constructivist approach in our study of economic and political empowerment of women in Barpeta District as a part of distinctive methodological exercise. Our problem relating to the issues of women involves critical judgments concerning governmental policies, programmes, schemes, etc. which have unquestionable practical import.

### **1.3. Review of Literature:**

The International Women's Decade 1975-85 provided an impetus to the growth of social science literature relating to women. During the nineteen seventies and eighties the studies on women's movement in India were not at all encouraging, rather the studies on women's issues as well as movements were in the nascent stage. Shah has rightly observed that except for a few many of the studies on women's movements in India are anecdotal or written in journalistic style - written by feminist activists (G.Shah: 1990).

Since our study involves several themes such as Socio-Economic, Educational Status and Political Awareness of women in Assam with special reference to Char areas of Barpeta District, it is hardly possible to prepare a comprehensive review of literature. Yet, there have been significant academic contributions to this area, which indicate both research gaps and directions of future research that may be noted here. Scholars believe that women's movements began in India as a part of the social reform movement in the 19th Century (Shah: 1990). Social reformers like Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranade, Behramji Malbari, raised their voices against the prevailing religious and social customs subjugating women (Heimsath 1964;

Mazumdar 1976; Sen S.P. 1979). They influenced the British Govt. to enact certain laws against the sati system, permitting woman to remarry, abolishing the custom of child marriage, etc. Initiatives were also taken by the British Govt. to spread education among girls. Some of these issues continue to affect even today our civil society that demand empirical study. Vina Mazumdar (1976), Devaki Jain (1986), Kalpana Shah (1984), Sujata Patel (1988) interpreted the status of women raised by Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, these works failed to analyze the status of Muslim women on which we would like to throw some lights. Heimsath (1964), N. Desai (1977), Everett (1979), Shah (1984) highlighted the political rights - equal franchise and representation in legislatures - for women as demanded by women leaders, who were supported by the Congress Party.

Jana Everett (1979), G. Omvedt (1978), Govind Kelkar (1984), Aparna Basu (1976, 1984), Rajani Alexander (1984), Meera Devi (1984) focused their studies on women's roles and participation in various movements alongwith the freedom movement. Shah (1984) and Caplan (1985) have shown, on the studies of AIWC (All India Women's Conference existed in the 1920s) that leaders at the local level come from the upper castes and the middle class. According to their studies these women are more educated than other women as a whole. The role of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party in mobilising women in various peasant struggles has also been highlighted by the several studies. But no such significant studies can be witnessed regarding the socio-economic and political status of women in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

Dr. Kunja Medhi (1991, 1998) has analysed women empowerment from global perspective alongwith analyzing the status of women in the context of their religio-political life. We would like to fill

those gaps through our study that Dr. Medhi did not touch. Najma Choudhury (1991) analysed the role of Muslim women in politics, but she confined the analysis to Bangladesh's society. Zarina Bhatta (1991) explained the role of Muslim women in India. We cannot come to the conclusion relating to economic and political empowerment of Muslim women in Assam through her analysis. Banita Alius (2001) in her Mizo Nari analysed the status of Mizo women. U.A. Shimray (2004) analysed women's position in Naga society. Dr. Jimli Bora Bharali (2003) in her Ph.D. thesis analysed the political participation of women in Assam with special reference to the role of women in Panchayat without sketching the role of Muslim women in the Char areas. Sumi Krishna (2005) in her gendered price of Rice in North-East India laid too much emphasis on Gender and Rice Farming. Our study is expected to throw some light on both the economic and political empowerment of womenfolk in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley pointing out women's role in family, society and political processes.

The literature on women studies / issues in Assam especially in the Barpeta District of Assam is not always well-focused. Most of the works on women in Assam assumed the form of running commentaries on various issues on women like dowry, domestic violence, women entrepreneurship, women's role in society, women and development, gender discrimination etc under the general theme of women in Assam. K.K. Barman and M. Bhattacharya (1998) analysed the status of Tea Garden Women workers in Assam. Manashi Baruah Deka and Sumita Roy (1998) highlighted women farmers of Assam engaged in rice based farming system. R. Borah (1995, 1999) focused on rural women alongwith highlighting selected characteristics of farm women. These works, however, are somewhat dated and do not include materials on the status of Muslim women. B.K. Kunda (2004, 2006) highlighted the role of Bodo women in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam alongwith

highlighting women's participation in Indian politics. Kunda (2004, 2006) too, has failed to analyze the status of Muslim women. N.K. Deka (2003) in an empirical study highlighted some aspects of fertility among Muslims of Barpeta District. Prof. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2003) conducted a survey in the year 2003 on "Muslim Women", which highlighted the socio-economic status and gender roles. According to Muslim Women Survey (MWS) conducted by Hasan and Menon "Muslim women are disadvantaged not because of religious conservatism but because they are poor, are women, and Muslim, which together aggravate the particular disadvantages of any one of the identities." The survey also has failed to cover the status of Muslim women in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley including the Char areas of Barpeta District of Assam. The Chief Literacy sources relating to the economic and political empowerment of Muslim women in the char areas of Assam, however, are still various unpublished documents, journalistic writings and seminar papers.

The foregoing discussion and review of literature make it clear that the question of women or the gender - related issue is a significant issue in our civil-society. Of course, gender studies got institutional recognition just two and a half decades ago. In fact, the gender became the focal point of discussion and seminars from the 1980s. In this connection, the role of UGC and ICSSR is noteworthy as both the institutions took the pioneering role in popularizing the gender - studies providing official seal and recognition. As a follow-up action, a number of universities and research institutions in our country have succeeded to upgrade the gender-study as a separate/distinct discipline from the broad frame of social sciences (Ray & Athparia: 2006). For instance, the Women's Studies Research Center, Gauhati University is UGC sponsored Research Centre under G.U., established in the year 1989. During the last 10 years it completed research

studies on diverse women related issues, conducted training programmes on Research Methodology and women's rights, organized workshops and seminars at different places, opened cells at different colleges under G.U., established ties with grass level women organizations and NGOs and also participated in policy discussions (WSRC: GU, 1997-2002). During Ninth Plan Period (March 1997-March'02) 15 Research projects were completed alongwith organizing of Seminars, workshops, and meetings on gender-related issue. But no such projects/seminars/workshops were completed and organized on the socio-economic and political awareness of womenfolk in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. We would like to focus on these areas through this study. Thus, gender-related issue has successfully entered into our civil society in such a way alongwith high sensitiveness that the policy makers, administrators, developmentalists, planners, sociologists, political scientists, academicians etc. are compelled to provide due weightage on this issue. Here lies the significance of study and further research highlighting the following objectives:

- To focus on the socio-economic status of women in the Char areas of Barpeta District of Assam is one of the objectives of our study. Analyzing this issue, the level of education is to be taken into account.
- To focus on the role of women of Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley in the grass-root level i.e. in Panchayat.
- To focus on the issue of political awareness/consciousness of Women in the Char areas of Barpeta District. This issue is to be analysed maintaining the linkage of socio-economic condition and educational status of womenfolk in the Char areas of the district.

- To focus on the area of the role of SHGs (Self Help Groups) formed by women folk highlighting the linkages of Banks/NGOs etc. Highlighting this area of economic empowerment, if there is any, it would be our modest attempt to focus the role of Muslim womenfolk in comparison to other womenfolk belonged to other religions in Family, Society, and Political Processes.
- To focus on organizational and managerial capacities of womenfolk in the Char areas of Barpeta District alongwith the organization of Women's Groups and Organizations.
- To focus on women's active involvement in socio-cultural activities.
- To focus on women's involvement in various economic activities leading to a decent life alongwith enhancing self-respect and self-confidence.
- To focus on women's involvement as decision - makers in peace and conflict resolution as individual's and group's level.

#### **1.4. The Conceptual Framework:**

Any issue is to be studied with a proper conceptual framework. In fact, without a conceptual framework systematic analysis is not possible. Thus, conceptual framework is significant relating to analyze and explore any issue.

So far as gender issue is concerned the international women movements are significant and if we look at international women movements (Woman's suffrage movement in the 1840s and 1850s), we can witness three major frameworks. They are - the Marxist, the Liberal and the Radical. The Marxists trace the roots of women sub-ordination to the growth of class society. The Marxists lay more stress on socio-economic structure of the society and opine that with the change of socio-economic structure through class-struggle the condition of

womenfolk would change. Thus alongwith the struggle for a change in material conditions, Marxism places great emphasis on the sustained struggle against ideas and ideologies which propagate women's subordination and which act as a major barrier to the achievement of women's emancipation (The Marxist: 2006). Radical feminists are in favor of radical change of womenfolk. According to radical feminists, there is a vast difference between man and woman in both mental and physical structures. In their view, all societies, historical and contemporary, are characterized by patriarchy, the institution, as Kate Millett (1969) put it, "that half of the population which is female is controlled by the half which is male" and they proclaim the need for a sexual revolution, a revolution that will, in particular, restructure personal, domestic and family life (Heyword: 1997). So, separate arrangement between the two is the utmost necessity. Liberal Feminists claim that the rights of men should be extended to women on the grounds that women are equal to men and thus should have the same rights. Despite differences in frameworks, the central focus of all the three center on the issues of women's oppression alongwith their solutions. The plight of the tribal and non-tribal women of North East India including Assam, can, however, not be analysed within any of these frameworks. Banita Alius (2001) has shown systematically how these frameworks failed to explain the Mizo social structure and the Mizo women. Recent feminist perspectives such as post-colonial and post-structuralist ones have moved beyond universalistic framing of the issues of gender, empowerment, relationship of state and gender and emphasized on the need to study local, diverse and dispersed nature of the sites of gender and state power, rights and empowerment (Pringle and Watson, 1992). The study of women's empowerment in the char area therefore needs to take into account the specifics of struggles, challenges and opportunities associated with living in such areas.

Hence, an attempt will be made to focus on the status of Muslim women in the Barpeta District of Assam independent of these three frameworks, though we would like to lay more stress on Marxist framework to understand the condition of Muslim womenfolk in the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with special reference to Char areas of Barpeta district.

We may begin with some theoretical premises to deduce some hypothetical answers to the question asked in our study (see the next section). First, rights and empowerment of women are affected by State's policies in regard to them. Favorable policies do help the cause of empowerment and as the current literature on feminism suggest, state is not universally patriarchal institution. Historical and situational differences pertaining to time and place affect both the role of the state and the extent and nature of women's empowerment and rights. Hence empowerment issues need to be seen both contextually and comprehensively. Muslim women in the char areas of Barpeta District of Assam are disadvantaged not because of religious conservatism but because they are poor, are women, and Muslim, and because they live in char areas that constitute their 'life world' as different from those of others which together aggravate the particular disadvantages of any one of the identities. Second, "Pardah-Polygamy - Talaq" as the unholy trinity that restrains the social status of Muslim women is partially true; but if we look at "socio-economic" and "place to place" context probably it would explore a new dimension relating to the status of Muslim women of the District.

Today, SHGs have started playing a very significant role not only in rural development but also in shaping the socio-economic condition of womenfolk. As instances of state intervention they may be quite effective for the empowerment of the Muslim women in the char areas

of Barpeta District of Assam. The significance of religious difference if any for reaping the benefit of this institutional change may be examined by way comparison to other womenfolk belonged to other religions.

### **1.5. Research Questions & Hypotheses :**

We intend to answer the following Research Questions on the basis of some hypotheses deduced from our conceptual framework.

1. If the Muslim Society, as alleged by the liberals, is basically conservative and restrictive because of Islamic injunctions, so far as Muslim women are concerned 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?
2. The question may be asked in a different way: 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 the light of the above, we propose to test the following hypotheses on the basis of data with respect to the above question.

- a) Economically empowered womenfolk usually take independent decision of their own in family, society, Panchayat, academic area alongwith in political process.
- b) Socio-Economic empowerment also enhances women's autonomy.
- c) Socio-Economic empowerment also provides weightage to womenfolk relating to health and medical facilities.
- d) Economic empowerment enhances political awareness/ consciousness.

### **1.6. A Note on Methodology:**

For testing the hypotheses discussed above we had 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. Below we elaborate a little on the methodological steps.

1. We proposed to select some villages of Muslim Dominated Blocks/Mouzas of Barpeta District as per Census Report.
2. We also proposed to select some wards of Muslim Dominated Town Committees/Municipal Boards, if there is any, in the Barpeta District which are contiguous areas of char areas.
3. We proposed to frame questionnaire, schedules for the womenfolk so far as selected areas of our study.
4. Relating to the role of SHGs shaping the economic empowerment of Muslim women, we proposed to take into account the study on Grameen Bank (Bangladesh) popularised by Prof. M. Yunus.
5. Participant observation, Schedules and personal interviews were to be carried out with utmost care and sincerity.

Some details on our field studies are provided below.

#### **1.7.1 Gathering Analytical Data: Field Work in Char Areas of Barpeta District, Assam:**

In the previous section we had pointed out several techniques of data collection such as interview, participant observation, survey research and so on. As far as survey research is concerned we had to look into the Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Since detailed information on such area is hard to come by and the last Census was held in 2001 we searched for other secondary sources also

for determining our area and sample. The important secondary sources that we relied on are mentioned under section 1.7.8. We come to know from the Census 2001 and secondary sources that three districts of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam have significant number of Char villages viz. Dhubri, Jorhat and Barpeta. In view of requirement of the repeated visits to Char areas for concluding field survey, and other practical consideration we decided to cover the Char areas of Barpeta districts for the purpose of our field study. The district alone had 277 Char villages, which presented before us a rather large universe from which an individual had to curve out on accurate sample. Naturally one had to exercise some judgment in designing the survey research.

Among the five Char Development Blocks, three were found to have more than 90 percent concentration of Char villages. These were Mandia, Chenga and Rupsi Development Blocks. Of course Mandia has the highest number of Char villages amounting to 166 followed by Chenga and Rupshi each having 42 Char villages.

Before we dealt with this problem of disproportionate concentration of Char villages between the Mandia on the one hand and the Chenga and the Rupshi on the other we had first to determine the total number of villages that we will cover in our survey. For this purpose we had classified all the 277 Char villages in three clusters, i.e.

- (i) Villages having population up to 500,
- (ii) Villages having population between 501 to 1000; and
- (iii) Villages having population above 1001 by way of frequency distribution of population of Char villages.

The clusters were more or less equal in terms of distribution of Char villages and therefore we selected six villages from each cluster at random, having 18 Char villages to cover through our survey. However,

in selecting the number of villages to be picked up from the three development blocks we had to choose the number of villages proportionally from each block. Given the ratio, one is to four between the block having the highest number of Char villages and that having the lowest we selected 12 villages at random from Mandia and 3 each from Chenga and Rupshi. These villages under different blocks were as follows:

Text Box No.1 : Blockwise Char Villages

Name of the Block	Name of the Char villages
1. Mandia Development Block:	1. Islampur 2. Jahanar Ghola 3. Aligaon Pather 4. Dighir Pather 5. Balajan 6. Morabajh 7. Jahanar Gaon 8. Bamundongra 9. Todhara Gaon 10. Silashi Pather 11. Baghbar 12. Niz-Baghbar
2. Chenga Development Block:	13. Majar Char 14. Sarudia 15. Dakhin Godhuni
3. Rupshi Development Block:	16. Char Saria 17. Gulia 18. Udmari

Given the fact that these 18 villages had 3014 households altogether we had to derive a sample of households which could effectively be covered in our study.

At confidence level of 95 percent and the confidence interval of 4.8 percent the sample size was determined to be 360 number of households. For covering the sample size through our survey we picked up 20 households at random each of 18 selected villages. Finally the

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questionnaire that was used to cover the sample population was considered accurate enough in view of the fact that the worst-case percentage of 50 percent was used. To ensure the reliability and validity of survey data standard statistical procedures were used during questionnaire formulation and analysis of data.

### **1.7.2. The First Field Trip:**

As mentioned earlier, we had selected 12 Char villages of Mandia Development Block under Barpeta District and as a follow-up action we started our first trip on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 because in the Char areas, the peak period of flood with several waves (3 – 5 major waves) starts from the month of July and continues till the month of September. In this period the Char areas were almost totally cut off from the mainland of Assam; not only the Chars, but all other localities in the chronically flood affected areas of the State also badly suffered from lack of transport and communication facilities (A.K. Bhagwati: 2005). Of course, some changes took place relating to infrastructural and institutional facilities since the 1980's. Thus during the last three decades road network of the Brahmaputra plain has been improved to some extent in connection with connecting the inaccessible riverine areas. Because of this network we succeeded to reach Baghbar very comfortably by Maruti Car even in the month of July. In other words, we started our first trip from Barpeta Road via district headquarter (Barpeta) to Baghbar by Maruti Car. It is worthwhile to mention here that innumerable fisheries were discernible along the roadsides in between Howly (Muslim dominated areas) and Barpeta. It is to be noted that Barpeta-Satrankanara-Baghbar (29K.M.) P.W.D. road is the only motorable road which has connected Baghbar from the district headquarter Barpeta. Though country boats are being used by the Char dwellers during the summer month (July, August and September) in

order to connect the Char dwellers of nearby villages to the riverbank urban and market centers yet privately owned 'motor boats (locally called Bhutbhuti) ply regularly through the river. It is worthwhile to mention here that Md. Haris Ali of Ramapara Char village started to ply motorboat for the first time in Barpeta district in the year 1983. This motor boat is one of the significant communication machinery of Char areas surrounding Baghbar. We reached Baghbar via Mandia. After reaching Baghbar we collected some information regarding the Char villages of Todhara gaon, Niz-Baghbar, Morabhajh, Silashi Pather, Bamundongra, Jahanar Ghola, Aligaon Pather, Dighir Pather, Baghbar gaon. All these Char villages are dominated by immigrant Muslims. They are economically poor and culturally backward. The Char dwellers are compelled to change their settlement because of heavy and unpredictable erosion of the Brahmaputra River. Thus, environmental uncertainty and poverty compel them to build their huts made of bamboos and locally available building materials. It is also interesting to note here that almost all the Char villages come into existence on the basis of the names of animals, fishes, incidents, plants and trees etc. or so we were told by the local people of these villages in the first trip.

We continued our first trip for gathering information regarding the Char villages of Charsaria, Udmari, Galia that fell under Rupshi Development Block. We started our journey as a part of first trip on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2007 from Barpeta Road via Sorbhog to Kalgachia. Kalgachia is one of the oldest immigrants Muslim dominated village of Barpeta District. At present, Kalgachia is undeclared small Muslim dominated town of Barpeta District. One can reach from Barpeta to Kalgachia through the Barpeta-Sorbhog-Kalgachia-Moinbori (71 KM from Barpeta to Moinbori) by motorable road. Kalgachia is bounded by Sorbhog in the North, Baghbar Hillock in the South, District Headquarter-Barpeta in the East and Abhayapuri in the West. The historical importance of

some of the villages of Rupshi Development Block is immense. For instance, Kalgachia, Chakchaka, Bheragaon, Guinalguri, Jania, Chapra, Chanpura are famous villages of this Block. Apart from this, Langla, Udmari, Sarcharia, Guileza, Galia, Barbhita, Janata Bazar, TND, Balajan, Balikuri have also been playing a very important role for the production of Jute, Mustards, Corns, Vegetables etc. The surveyed Char villages of our study under Rupshi Development Block, such as Sarcharia, Udmari and Galia are heavily affected because of flood and erosion of the Beki – the tributary of the mighty river Brahmaputra. During the last few years, huge areas have been washed away because of severe flood and erosion under Kalgachia Revenue Circle of the district. As per our observation as a part of first trip flood and erosion have become a great menace to the people of this block and circle. If adequate steps are not taken at the appropriate time probably very beautiful small town Kalgachia and it's nearby Char villages will be washed away in the near future.

We continued our first trip in order to gather information regarding Char villages under Chenga Development Block. We started our journey on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2007 by Maruti Car from Barpeta Road via Howly and Barpeta. Barpeta-Chenga-Bahari (23 KM) is a motorable road through which one can reach Chenga and Bahari. Tarabari-Bahari was a significant river port and a big market place of Barpeta District. During 1959-62 the famous Tarabari market was totally engulfed by the mighty river Brahmaputra. We collected our first hand information regarding the Char villages of Sarudia, Dakhin Godhani and Major Char after reaching Bahari.

In this connection it is worthwhile to mention here that the main objective of our first trip was to select the appropriate methods of data collection such as interview, identification of SHG's etc. along with

preparation for pilot survey. After visiting the Char villages of these three Developments Blocks of Barpeta district it is our observation that the socio-economic life of char dwellers particularly the lives of womenfolk are very deplorable. In fact, major portion of them are below the poverty line and naturally almost all of them are living under very deplorable condition. Lack of proper means of communication, population problems, health and hygienic problems are common problems of Char dwellers. Apart from these, the pure drinking water is still in their dreams. In fact, the Char dwellers are living with unlimited problems. Along with these problems both the mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributary Beki have rendered the people homeless every year. Even the question of doubtful citizenship has made the genuine Char dwellers spend sleepless nights. In other words, lakhs of permanent settlements, landlessness loss of citizenship have turned the people of Char areas into nomads. After carrying out and conducting interviews with some people of these villages it can be concluded that the complexity and contradiction of the problems of Char areas need deeper and detailed study. Here lies the significance of our study.

### **1.7.3. The Second Field Trip:**

We started our second field trip in the month of October 2008. We selected the month of October, because the Char-Dwellers start preparing land for the cultivation of rabi crops like wheat, lentil, black gram, mustered, rapeseed, sesames and a variety of vegetables. In fact, just after the recession of flood and leading a troublesome miserable life during July to September, to some extent a new life of Char-dwellers start with the preparation of land for the cultivation along with blossoming of 'Kahua' (*S. Spontaneum*) which has certainly broadened the beautification of Char villages which we wanted to enjoy. Rabi crops

and a variety of vegetables as well as Kahua add to the scenic beauty of the Char villages.

Of course, the objective of our second trip was to conduct pilot survey along with finalizing the questionnaire. We started our pilot survey at Islampur Char village under Mandia Development Block. We faced a lot of problems in connection with conducting pilot survey on the basis of our proposed questionnaire. The womenfolk of almost all Char villages were not easily accessible as they hesitated to take part in discussion. In fact, we have failed to bring them to take part in our discussion in the first attempt. Naturally we changed our technique to know about their socio-economic and political awareness and recruited some youths who were very much acquainted with their culture and customs. As a result we succeeded to complete our pilot survey in between November and December 2008 in all the 18 Char villages of three Development Blocks.

#### **1.7.4. The Third Field Trip:**

After completing our pilot survey we prepared our final questionnaire and on the basis of the final questionnaire we started to conduct final survey during July and September, 2009. In fact, it was very difficult to conduct survey during Rainy Season particular in the Char areas. We selected this period in connection with experiencing the flood-affected people. Even after recession of flood, Char-dwellers faced land erosion, which were to be analyzed in the subsequent discussion. Their dwelling houses were damaged due to flood and erosion. Their landed properties were also damaged. Even before the arrival of high flood the Char dwellers prepared themselves to stay temporarily over the embankments or in the raised platforms built under the initiative of the State Government. At times, the Char dwellers were compelled to stay over the boats or banana rafts either inside or close to the house

for days together along with the animals during the flood days as observed by A.K. Bhagabati (2005). We had the opportunity to witness these problems of Char dwellers on a number of occasions. Because of all these, we selected this period (Rainey season) for finalizing our survey. But, our attempt failed. Thus, we launched our third trip again during October – November 2010 in connection with undertaking our survey and after spending 70 days we succeeded to finalize our survey which will be reported in a subsequent chapter.

### **1.7.5. Interviews**

The role of womenfolk in family, society and political process 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 Northeast of India. It is also equally true that economically empowered womenfolk can take independent decision on their own in family, society, academic area along with in political process as a number of studies have reported. We have surveyed 18 Muslim dominated Char villages under three Development Blocks of Barpeta District and carried out interview with a number of Muslim women in the Char areas. After conducting interview it has come to our notice that the major portion of the people belonging to char areas are living below the poverty line. Some women stated that they did not know about the SHG movement. Of course, some members of SHG stated that they could not be economically empowered through the formation of SHGs unless the State Government came forward in connection with selling the products. As no SHGs had yet been formed in some of the surveyed Char villages how could we expect that the empowerment and self-confidence of women would raise. Even some of the women stated in the negative regarding the activities of SHGs. The women of Char villages did participate in the protest meetings

organized by political parties along with casting their votes with great vigour and enthusiasm. During the campaign of last Panchayat Election Central Committee Member and Former State Secretary, CPIM, Mr. Hemen Das, reported in an interview that Mr. Das was surprised at Muslim women participation in political meeting at Baguriguri Pather under Barnagar Circle of Barpeta District. In an interview with Muslim womenfolk of Char Area it was found that they did participate in the political process for economic benefit and redressing of poverty and hardship. In this connection the observation of Bina Agarwal is noteworthy as she 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 empowerment outside the home, especially not in the fields 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). 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 compelled women to seek outside work and challenge restrictive purdah norms; on the other hand, groups solidarity within BRAC has clearly strengthened women’s ability to effectively alter the norms. She has also cited the report of BRAC women 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). In the Char villages of Barpeta District too, the strengthening of SHGs should be encouraged not only for breaking social norms but also for broadening socio-economic status of womenfolk which would certainly enhance the confidence of poverty stricken womenfolk along with raising political awareness.

We have also witnessed many Muslim women at the time of the counting of votes in the last Panchayat Election (January 2008) that shook their hands with winning male candidates and political leaders. It is also noted that major portion of Muslim women of Barpeta District like other Muslim dominated districts of Assam cast their votes with great vigour. In an interview some of the Muslim women did admit that they cast their votes for fear of deleting their name from the electoral rolls and as a follow-up action they would be treated as 'foreigners'. We remind them that non-casting of votes do not necessarily mean deletion of names from the electoral rolls and non-citizens. Yet, heavy turn out of Muslim women can be witnessed during polls whether it was Panchayat or Assembly or Parliamentary in comparison to Hindu womenfolk as per record of the Election Department.

We have also interviewed a large number of womenfolk of Char villages to know their political process together with women's economic independence and autonomy. It has come to our notice that Muslim womenfolk belonging to char or rural areas are more conscious about their status and position than the urban women of the District. It is noted that so-called educated Muslim women of several towns (e.g. Howly, Bahari, Kalgachia, Barpeta Road) of Barpeta district are not at all interested in participating actively in the political process. They are simply reluctant so far as politics is concerned. Even they are indifferent about their status and position both in the family and

society. They abide by the religious stricture too. But on the other hand, as per our interview and discussion Muslim women belonging to char areas (rural) of Mandia, Chenga and Rupshi Development Blocks under the district of Barpeta are much more conscious about their rights, role, position and status in the family, society and political process. Lesser-educated and low-and-insecure earners both within and outside the family do play a significant role for egalitarian and democratic society, as there has been a loosening of restrictive social norms for the rural and char dwellers/womenfolk both within the home and outside it.

#### **1.7.6.Observation:**

After conducting First, Second and Third Trips in the Char villages of three Development Blocks, carrying out interviews and participating in discussion with a number of Muslim women in various towns as well as 18 Char villages and rural areas of Barpeta District it has come to our observation that Muslim women are poor, illiterate and less politically conscious. It is also our observation that low level of education has reduced women's earning prospects and possibilities of economic independence. Major portion of womenfolk of these areas do not have any land in their names, but they feel that 'right to property and joint land patta' is utmost necessity for economic empowerment. Polygamy is prevailing in the char areas. Major portion of womenfolk abide by religious Mullas/Dewanis. Lack of education also forces them to lead superstitious lives. Thus, the size of family is large because illiterate womenfolk assume that the children are the gifts of God i.e. 'Allah' for which they are reluctant to adopt family planning. Even some of them remark that they are ignorant about family planning devices. Of course, it has come to our notice that one of the most significant reasons for not adopting family planning in these areas is poverty. They

prefer 'sons' as they would contribute to generating resources of the family in due course of time. Some women of these char villages remark that by being members of SHGs they bring no significant changes in connection with socio-economic status. Some however said that through the SHG movement the self-confidence of some women members had been raised. They achieved the courage to meet Block Development Officer in connection with constituting SGHs. They also achieved the courage to discuss with the Bank Managers regarding opening up of Bank Account on behalf of concerned SHG. Though economically not yet empowered in the stricter sense of the term through the SHGs, yet it is our observation that a change is to be witnessed in the char areas of our surveyed villages too like other rural areas of Barpeta District. Of course all the selected surveyed Char villages do not possess the same characteristics regarding women SHGs, as the primary activities of SHGs are dissimilar in nature.

Womenfolk of Char villages are conscious regarding health and medical facilities although due to inadequate medical facilities they are very much dependent on 'Kabiraj' or 'Quake'. It is also found that the major reason for the low work participation of women in our surveyed char villages for their restricted engagement in agriculture. As mentioned earlier, both the ownership of property and land have denied economic independence and autonomy to womenfolk. It has ultimately stood as a stumbling block in connection with decision-making process. The residential place of the Char dwellers is highly backward and their dwelling roofs are made of locally available thatch and grasses with a steep slope along with walls made of either bamboos or dry jute. Except for the matabbors (Dewanies or Group leader) who have two to three relatively good houses sometimes with tin roofs, all other families reside in single thatched houses along with a small open shed for housing the domesticated animals as rightly observed by A.K.

Bhagabati (2005). Dwelling houses are damaged by flood and erosion every year completely or partially. During flood and natural calamities womenfolk and children of these Char villages become the worst victims. After conducting interviews and carrying out field survey we could experience a gloomy picture relating to the socio-economic, educational and political consciousness of the Muslim women which will be explained in the subsequent analysis. The question of womenfolk in the Char villages is not the question of socio-economic and political status rather the question of 'survival'. Probably, the question of survival has compelled the womenfolk in our surveyed char areas to cast their votes with great vigour and enthusiasm making the election a great festival.

#### **1.7.7. Documentary Research:**

Our study was also based on documentary evidences which were not readily available such as Party Manifestoes of several political parties, Assembly Proceedings and Governor's report together with resolutions of Annual Conferences of political parties. Apart from these, our study depended on Census Reports of 1991 and 2001, Government of India for facts and figures regarding demographic profile, literacy rate, gender gap in literacy etc. of our surveyed Char villages along with the District of Barpeta and Assam. In order to undertake our study we were very much dependent on Socio-Economic Survey Report 1993-94 of Char areas of Assam and Socio-Economic Survey Report 2002-03 of Char areas of Assam, prepared and conducted by the Directorate of Char Areas Developments, Assam that served documents as important sources.

**1.7.8. Secondary Research:**

Our work was also largely dependent on a number of articles presented in an 'International Seminar' on "The Problems and Prospects of Char Areas of Brahmaputra with special reference to lower Assam" held in the year 2004 and organized by "Char Areas Welfare Society for Socio-Economic Research (CAWSSER)" an NGO in collaboration with Luitparia College, Alopai Major Char, Barpeta. Assam Human Development Report 2003, Economic Survey Assam 2004 – 2005 and 2007 – 08 have also provided vital information regarding our study. Along with these, CAISHA – a souvenir, published on the occasion of Assam Sahitya Sabha's Kalgachia Special Annual Session 2002, BALICHANDA – a souvenir, published on occasion of Brihattar Char-Chapari Baghbar Sahitya Sanmilan 1997 and Smaranika published on the occasion of first death anniversary of Gulam Osmani, 2009 have provided huge information relating to our work. Several issues of Char-Chapori research journal relating to Assam's Char-Chapori together with several survey reports and studies as well as books on Muslim Women have contributed a lot to our work as a part of secondary research. Human Development Reports of several years prepared and published by United Nations Development Project, World Development Reports of various years as well as India 2009 – A reference annual also provided huge materials in connection with conducting our study.

**1.8. 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. Social discrimination and negligence of

womenfolk along with lower economic position and educational status together with insignificant role in political process have attracted due attention not only from social scientists but also from policy makers, planners, developmentalists etc. for which the question of women's economic empowerment and political empowerment is to be considered as significant and crucial issue. This vital issue would be highlighted in the context of Char areas of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam with special reference to Barpeta District.