CHAPTER I

Introduction
1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The term 'empowerment' is frequently heard today. Ordinarily stated, the word empowerment is derived from the word 'empower' meaning to give or to acquire power or to increase power. The actual meaning of empowerment is the ability or capacity of a person or a group to command over the actions of others. Through such actions, the voice of the group is heard. The empowerment can be acquired through favourable actions of the legislature in a democratic country or through self assertion on the part of the group. Thus the word empowerment also implies a change in the equation or level of power. But in the larger context, women's empowerment aims at changing the balance of power between the sexes so as to create a more equitable distribution of power.¹

In the context of empowerment of women, J.K. Pillai in his article 'Empowering Women in India - New Roles for Education' says,

'Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process which should enable women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. It should consist of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their life, greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from practiced set of customs, beliefs and practices'.²
If we go through the historical perspective of the conditions of women across the world, it is found that they have travelled a long way to achieve social, economic and political rights. The process of emancipation was not very easy and there were concerted movements by the women's bodies in different countries, particularly in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. This was the period of great awakening and the world at large began to acknowledge the rights of women. There were different aspects of woman's life, the movements took up and these were classified as the gender related issues. The gender related movements in socialist countries took a lead in identifying discrimination on the basis of class. There are cases of oppression against the women of the poorer sections of the population and there is the demand for social equality. Such conscious movements required convenient socio-economic situations. The movements needed right conditions and right times as a part of their struggle against general oppression and class dominance. In the countries like India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, women acquired the highest political positions in the country because of the system of universal suffrage.³

While in Egypt, conservative attitude of the government stood in the way of women's emancipation, in Japan both traditional and modernity together affected women's lives. In Japan, women were
supposed to be loyal to father in childhood and husband after marriage. Even a wife did not have the right to succeed to her husband’s property. But the situation has changed and the Japanese society is gradually giving up their old values and traditions.4

Now a days in advanced countries, urbanization and education has liberated women to a great extent, but the shift from agriculture to industrialization in spite of improving their economic condition has placed additional physical burden on women.5

The women’s issues are not compact, homogeneous and identical for all countries and for all classes; its economic, social and political dimensions are to be taken into account. Like all socio-political problems, the women’s issues are also bound by the time and space. In the context of economic development, we are to identify how it affects women at large. In the developing countries, there is debate on the upliftment of rural economy. Women, obviously make half of the vast rural population. There is a close symbiotic relationship existing between the development of national economy and the rural upliftment. The development does not mean merely the development at the macro level; it should penetrate effectively into the micro levels of the national economy. The women in India suffer from different types of socio-economic discriminations. Especially in rural areas, women like to remain in
kitchen mostly having no concerns for the society at large. There are obvious advantages which the urban women enjoy in matters of education, shelter and health and their conditions are better than their rural sisters.6

Generally, the economic status of women is accepted as an indicator of society’s stage of development.7 The empowerment of women does not merely mean the rise of money income or larger life spans. It may happen that a woman may live in a comparatively better material comfort, yet she may be powerless even over her own life. So empowerment is a kind of increasing autonomy of a woman that provides her a share in the power of decision making.8

In India’s societal contexts, women’s duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well defined which implies that the role of wifehood and motherhood is the most important role for women and they need not pursue any specialized discipline of knowledge or profession.9

In a male dominated society, women are considered as the members of the weaker sex. When the constitution of India was drafted, the women’s issues had already hit the streets in different countries of the world forcing the states to accord the equal rights to them. The Article 14 of the Constitution of India guarantees equality before law and Article 15 prohibits discrimination between man and
woman on the basis of sex, caste or religion. The Article 16 states that the citizens of both sexes, irrespective of their religion, caste, race, descent and place of birth are equally entitled to employment, without any favour or discrimination, under any of the governments in India.\textsuperscript{10}

In addition to this, the Directive Principles of State Policy also embody the goal of the welfare state. To attain the objective of welfare state, free and compulsory education for all citizens up to the age of 14, right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women, equal pay for equal work and maternity relief are some of the specific directive principles.\textsuperscript{11} But in spite of all these Constitutional provisions, the role of women in rural India has not improved to that extent which was expected by the Constitution makers. Many women in rural India are forced to be confined within the four walls of their homes due to extreme social inhibitions and lack of education. Their talents and abilities instead of being developed and cultivated, remain unexplored. This deprivation obviously has psychological repercussions and inflicts on them the added burden of frustration. Women in those circumstances are subject to various kinds of exploitation at different levels and they face discrimination. The weakness, forced or self inflicted, invites discrimination.\textsuperscript{12}
A nation's greatness depends on how much respect and status, women enjoy in the society. The general observations on the effects of the liberal democracy on the womenfolk of India are that there is a signal transformation of women in the upper and the middle class population in the country. But, often, the old practices are hard to abandon. The social practices which were part of a feudal society linger on, in spite of the liberality of modern education. The state comes on heavily through legislations on the dowry givers and takers but the evil practices could not be altogether rooted out. Education definitely had blunted the edges of the evil forces but it could not crush it altogether. The continuous campaign against it is necessary. But the lower income groups who form the vast majority of the population show an ambivalent position between the lack of urges to break inertia and a little mobility. The poverty is one of the main reasons behind their nearly static position in the economic ladder. The poverty and illiteracy are the close twins and India's millions are steeped in the tentacles of poverty. The spectre of poverty is visible in all places including the remote villages of the Katigorah constituency. The incidence of dowry death, bride burning and female infanticide is the regular headline of the newspapers. Besides these, there are other social evils also such as harassment, violence against women, wife beating, divorce,
prostitution, child marriage etc. There is need of constantly monitoring the status of women throughout the country in a comprehensive way. As the knowledge of rights and privileges easily reach urban women, they demand and receive more economic and social rights. But there are millions of women still live in the dark corners of the rural societies in the country.\textsuperscript{14}

The Katigorah constituency is chosen for the study not only because it represents a case of extreme backwardness in the region but it also serves as an indicator of the trend elsewhere in Barak valley. Here women are to face obstacles which are traditionally imposed on them and they are the inheritors of the past practices from which they cannot extricate themselves easily. In this matter, they are, no better then their sisters in the innumerable villages of the country. The women of Katigorah do not have role model before them as the social mobility is slow and the urban centres are away from the constituency. The women of this constituency are from several communities, each impose its prohibitive customs and usages on them. The constituency is strategically important but the touch of development eluded it. Those who represented this region in the State Assembly and Parliament did not think of utilizing its human resources and women mostly stay indoors apparently having no role in development. The thought of women's emancipation or
empowerment is externally imposed but their minds are shut out from within as the social conditions remain still prohibitive for them. The cry of the women of this area is not heard by any body. So the emancipation and empowerment of women of the Katigorah constituency would become meaningful when appropriate efforts are made for enabling them to get education, health care and reasonable employment to exercise socio-political and economic power.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

We have completed 62 years of our country’s independence and have entered the 21st century. Though there is significant progress in the last few decades, lots are still to be achieved. There are large number of people who still live under the poverty line in India, the Indian economy has embarked on a course of liberalization which raised a question mark whether the efforts in that line really improved the conditions or forced the rural population into unhealthy competition and they are asked to pay more for the essential commodities they require. During this period, the Government of India announced many programmes aimed at improving the lot of the rural poor but the implementation of the programmes is lop sided and the benefits which normally should go to the target groups do not reach them properly. As for instance, the
Indira Awas Yajona, Rozgar Yajonas, Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and mid day meal programmes along with the ambitious Prime Minister's Sarak Yajona, all in combination are capable of transforming the rural landscape altogether. Women, in particular, can be recipients of such welfare measures. Several such schemes were introduced by the government for the overall upliftment of the rural women but considering the immense size of the population in the rural areas, the government's efforts fell short of the demands.

The broad objectives of the study will be to analyse the linkage between political empowerment of women and their socio-economic development in the Katigorah Constituency of Barak Valley.

During the course of analysis, the efforts have been made:

i) To find out the common features of disabilities that effect women of the region and those of the Katigorah constituency.

ii) To find out the commonalities through the study of such relationship and its eventual effects in gender equality.

iii) To assess the level of socio-economic empowerment of women in general and women of different tribal communities.
iv) To assess the level of implementation of the constitutional provisions for the political empowerment of women at the local level.

v) To assess the role of Non-Government Organizations working at the local level with goals to improve socio-economic conditions of women.

1.3 HYPOTHESIS

In this study, it is hypothesized that there is a strong correlation between the political empowerment and socio-economic development of women. Without socio-economic development, political empowerment can never be successful. The socio-economic development of the constituency must show up in the form of road development, extension of medical care facilities, the extension of literacy among the rural poor, engagement of them in suitable employment and also the visible control over the security aspect in the constituency will have direct bearing on the women and their political empowerment will be more meaningful eventually.

The hypothesis is tested through descriptive analysis of data. The statistics on the different aspects of the development only helped the analytical process undertaken.

The study follows a descriptive design in which a survey is
contemplated. In this survey, women of several categories of the society are interviewed with the help of structured questionnaires prepared for the purpose. Besides that, the women panchayat representatives are separately interviewed to know the level of political empowerment enjoyed by them.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

As the title of the paper concerns the empowerment of women in a particular constituency, the collection of information is of fundamental necessity to clear the theoretical concept of empowerment. The study is basically an empirical investigation into the knowledge of the concerned theme. In order to arrive at a conclusion regarding the co-relation between the political empowerment of women and their socio-economic development in a particular constituency, the empirical research methods are followed. The level of women's empowerment at a global and national context is also studied with proper emphasis. The effects of the efforts on that line at the international and the national levels are available in several books, reports and journals. If the physical impacts are slow to penetrate in the interiors, the studies on the countrywide movement are taken up by the different government and non government agencies for transmission to the people.
1.5 FIELD STUDY TECHNIQUES AND SOURCES OF DATA

The important guiding factor in choosing appropriate method to collect data and to analyse them depends upon the problems at hand. The nature of the work required the collection of both primary and secondary data. Since the information on theoretical and general aspects are plenty, drawn from the different secondary sources, the primary sources are tapped through personal contacts and discussions.

1.5.1 PRIMARY DATA

For quantitative data collection, a survey work is undertaken at the personal level. The primary data are collected from the field visits supplemented by arranging discussions and interviews with women of different categories of society and with this aim in view, two questionnaires are made, one for interviewing the women in general and the women of different ethnic communities and the second set of questionnaire is prepared in the form of a schedule to interview the women panchayat members elected in the year 2001. The prepared questionnaire elicits information verbally or in writing but a schedule invites only the verbal answers. Many women interviewed are not literates and their verbal responses are noted down by me. Besides this, different NGO workers, old and experienced persons of the area are also interviewed and their
responses are recorded.

The sample respondents for the purpose are drawn from the selected villages through purposive sampling method. There are 187 revenue villages in the Katigorah Constituency. Of them, 12 villages are selected for the purpose, the names of which are available from the Office of the Deputy Director of Economics and Statistics, Cachar, Silchar.

For the purpose of interviewing the women of general and ethnic communities the sampled families are purposively chosen and the women respondents are interviewed following the questionnaire. The Zilla Parishad, Silchar provided the list of office bearers of the Panchayats from which, 44 elected women members are chosen for personal interview. The care is taken to see that all communities with emphasis on their economic persuasions are represented properly in the group for interview.

1.5.2 SECONDARY DATA

The study requires a good deal of secondary information, gathered from different articles, books, documents and seminar papers published on different aspects of gender issues from time to time. Apart from this, published newspaper reports, unpublished documents are used as the secondary sources of information. The
documents include Census Reports of 1961, 1971, 1991 and 2001. The other documents consulted are, from the following establishments – the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), Silchar, the Surma Valley Branch of the Indian Tea Association, Silchar, the Block Development Offices in Katigorah and Kalain, the Office of the Deputy Director of Economics and Statistics, Cachar, Silchar, the Office of the Additional Chief Medical and Health Officer (Family Welfare) Cachar, Silchar, the Office of Zilla Parishad, Silchar. Several important books on the subject are consulted at the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati. The documentary evidences are drawn from the three important sources housed in the Gauhati University, the Indian Council of Historical Research (North East Regional Centre), the Women Studies Research Centre, and the Central Library. At my home town, Silchar, the B.C. Gupta Memorial Central Library, G.C. College, the Central Library, Women's College and the Assam University Library at Dorgakona are consulted in connection with the work.

1.6 FIELD WORK PROCEDURE

The field work is conducted for a period of eight months to establish good rapport with women of different categories. It is a nice experience to undertake the interview schedule in villages spread over the whole constituency. Except few, the places of all
interviews are their residences. Some of them are fairly articulate and spoke in formal manner, others are free and frank in expressing their opinion.

1.7 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Of late, the literature on women's empowerment is available for study and the experiences of many workers at the grassroots are chronicled properly. A researcher has access to these literatures when a study is undertaken in a chosen area. R.K. Dutta\textsuperscript{15} in the book, Women Empowerment observes:

'Society is generally sensitized to the injustice perpetuated on the women over the centuries. The Problems of women reared in a traditional set up and ethos remain even when they take up employment. The face of the managerial superiority of the father, brothers or the husband is so deep rooted in the society that even though a young woman becomes the bread winner or one more earning member of the family, she does not enjoy the economic independence that ought to be hers'.

In this context, in her book Women and Development - The Indian experience, Mira Seth's\textsuperscript{16} observation is that the information on sex ratio, child mortality indices, nutritional status and the different opportunities which are necessary for self development along with data on education motivate a research scholar to reach at a conclusion. The problems of women can be generalized but women
in some areas have problems which are peculiar to the area. Yet, another end of the question is the eager participation of the government and non government agencies in the field.

In this very context Chandana Saha in her book *Gender Equity and Equality* observes that even in Jaipur and Tonk, the society prefers male child to be vaccinated as preventive measure and a female child is allowed to grow without much care.

Again, Harjeet Ahluwalia in the Article *Empowerment of Women: An economic agenda* states that voluntary non-government organizations and private sectors should work in the field of reproductive and child health and basic education because without basic education, reproductive and child health of the country cannot be improved.

While Jane Stein in the book, *Empowerment and Women's health* gives concrete view about women empowerment, D. Paul Chowdhry in the book *Women Welfare and Development* discusses about needs and problems of women, Jane Stein observes,

'Empowerment is particularly complex because it is multi-dimensional and takes place in multiple domains, home community, organizations, political realm and so on. It is legally defined and embedded in social, cultural and political contexts'.
D. Paul Chowdhry observes,

'Women constitute half of India’s population and contribute to the socio-economic development in a big way. It is necessary that their needs and problems and issues are placed in sharp focus'.

Martha C. Nussbaum\textsuperscript{21} in the book \textit{Women and Human Development – the Capabilities Approach} focuses on the study of human capabilities as the basis for fundamental political principles and gives special emphasis on the lives of women in developing countries. The author explains it as:

'Women in short, lack essential support for leading lives that are fully human. This lack of support is frequently caused by their being women. Thus, even when they live in a constitutional democracy such as India, where they are equals in theory, they are second class citizens in reality'.

On this very context of gender relationship, Sujit Kumar Dutta and Dilip Kumar Ghosh\textsuperscript{22} in their book \textit{Empowering Rural Women} state that the attitudes of male towards female should be changed, both must show respect for each other, the relationship should be more of complimentary than contradictory. Man should accept woman as his partner and not a liability and this positive attitude of man will bring confidence in the mind of woman.
Ashok Kaul also in the article Understanding Gender: The Decentring of Subjectivity observes that to reduce the gender gap, the position of woman should be improved by making her locally empowered so that she would be able to take decision in the small issues which affect her life. It may enable her to play a role within the social ranges of which she is also a member. With local empowerment, she may assume her membership in village bodies and her rights established.

The ethnic diversity is a subject of study and women in each of the ethnic groups living the north eastern part of the country represents cultural distinctiveness of the group. In most of the tribal societies, women play a pivotal role. An observer who is an outsider catches hold of the basics of the culture of a tribe through the study of women in that society and meaningfully uses this information in his study. T. Lahon in his Presidential address published in the Proceedings Volume of XIVth Annual NEIPSA (North East India Political Science Association) Conference (2005) states,

'A society cannot be called forward moving where ill treatment are meted out to women and kept suppressed. To push the society forward woman should enjoy equal status as man. There is a need for implementing a state policy for women'.

The author also thinks that in the process of empowerment of
women of North East, gender equality is very much essential. Above all, women of this particular region must have access and control over the economic resources and thereby to get equal status in the socio-economic and political fields.

*Status of Women in Assam with special reference to Non-Tribal Society* contains contributions from different writers and this compilation is edited by S.L. Baruah. The writers mentioned the effects of different socio-religious taboos and beliefs on the life of a woman and these act as the impediments on the path of her progress as a person. The family and society pause as the detriments to her progress imposing the burdens of taboos and beliefs.

E. Bala Gurusamy in the article *Improving the Status of Women* in University News observes,

> 'An important means of women empowerment is economic independence through information, knowledge and necessary skills. If a woman is economically versatile parasite, she can never claim an equal status with man. Women's awareness about development is basic to achieving this economic empowerment.'

Regarding economic empowerment of women, R.S. Srivastava in the article *Women Empowerment: Some critical issues* states that women have very limited access to those provisions which provide a good quality of life.
On the question of how to achieve economic empowerment, M. Chandramani\textsuperscript{28} in the article *Self Help Groups for Empowerment of Rural Women* discusses that self help group is a widely accepted instrument to empower women socially and economically and accordingly the author asserts that such empowerment exercises an influence on the overall development of women. The economic independence which is achieved by self help groups will not only facilitate in bringing about sexual equality but also enhance the income earning opportunities.

The article *Micro finance and the State - Exploring areas and structures of Collaboration* written by M.S. Sriram\textsuperscript{29} in Economic and Political Weekly reviews the performance of different channels of micro finance and also the new forms of collaboration in the delivery of micro finance services to the people.

The year 2005 was earmarked as the International year of microcredit. In this context in *Saving Grace – Convergence for Micro Finance News*\textsuperscript{30}, it is observed,

'Another primary aim of the year is to increase public awareness about reliability to micro finance clients, especially women in repaying loans, managing household incomes, building assets and enterprises and contributing to the economy'.
In the Indian Sub Continent, in broader spectrum of India and Bangladesh, it is reported by the involved NGOs that there is less participation of women in the developmental programmes. To overcome the lukewarm enthusiasm of women in developmental works, Mohammad Yunus, popularly known as the father of microcredit system, started a research project in Bangladesh in 1979 and came out with ideas of microcredit that resulted in the establishment of Gramin Banks in Bangladesh in 1983.51

Literature on micro-finance and its tremendous impact on the women’s lives and status are very well depicted in the article Microcredit and women’s empowerment in Bangladesh written by Simeen Mahmud.32 Here the author illustrates the relationship between socio-economic development and women’s empowerment which has emerged at the grass root level in Bangladesh. The author has emphasized that the changes in the lives of rural women in Bangladesh was made possible because of the increase in their access to credit. And the most significant thing is that the membership in microcredit programme is basically a programme for women where the participation rate is about 90 per cent.

In the context of North East, a report was published on Assam in Saving Grace – Convergence for Micro Finance News33 where it was stated that in Assam, for the progress of Bank Linkage programme
during 2003-04, an amount of Rs. 519.543 lakh was disbursed by banks in Assam to 4,573 credit linked SHGs and 8,050 SHGs have been credit linked since 1998-99.

1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The geographical coverage of the study is the women of the Katigorah Constituency, their lives and problems. The study relates to the operation of the institutions on women and their empowerment within our democratic system.

We know that women constitute half of the population of the world and they constitute one third of world labour force. But till today, majority of them are economically dependent on men. In Assam at present the total population is 2,66,38,407 and the female population is 1,28,50,608 (as per census 2001) and there is 932 females as per 1000 males.34

In Assam, the population is not homogeneous, there are various social and economic groups divided by religion, language and ethnicity. In rural areas, women’s participation in public life in proper light is always difficult. A woman because of her lack of education, health awareness and family responsibilities, hardly have any time to devote her attention to any public affairs. And if this situation continues, then the 33.3 per cent reservation for women at
panchayat level will be in vein. Even in tribal societies, where women enjoy equal status with men, they participate in the economic production, but their societies also baring few are male dominated.

The wide expanse of the Katigorah constituency cannot boast of good medical facilities and in the interiors of the constituency, the people rely on the quacks to meet the emergency needs or they are to go to the nearest government medical centres for treatment which are established only in selected spots. In absence of the organized medical care in all villages, the people are forced to depend on the quacks. A person suffering from acute pains or fever is carried by his attendants over a distance to get the glimpse of a qualified doctor as the patient is carried by some people through the slushy paths through the paddy fields. The primary health centres are opened in some selected villages (community Health centre, Kalain, the primary health centre, Jalalpur and the mini primary health centre, Katigorah) but the qualified doctors hardly venture to stay there twenty four hours in a day nullifying the ‘welfare’ intentions of the government.

The villages in the interior had no tradition of learning in the past and it is difficult to break the inertia. In the houses of the farmers, tea garden workers and the tribal population, the urge to
start the process of learning requires real efforts. The education, itself is a self induced process. There was the general apathy towards female education in the interior in the past and the favourable atmosphere for universal education is linked with the economic condition of the parents. Here, the economic hardship works as a deterrent in case of learning. Unless they are induced vigorously from outside (e.g. the provision for mid day meal and the free distribution of books and writing materials etc), the children will not show eagerness to learn.

The only means of Communication in the interior are ‘boat and foot’ and the remote villages are connected by narrow foot paths through the paddy fields where no vehicle can move. The rainy season makes these footpaths so slushy that only those who live in the area know how to tackle these wild paths. In the rainy season, the condition worsens as the whole area goes under water. In 2004 and 2007, there was flood water all around in the constituency making movements difficult for the normal businesses. The distance is then, covered by boats. The people prefer to walk through the paddy fields to reach their destinations. It is the normal practice. In the absence of roads, walking kilometers is the solution. The information through daily newspapers and journals do not reach the interior villages. In absence of easy communication, the traders
charge high prices for essential commodities. The unsuspecting people are the victims to all sorts of religious prejudices and they are forced to believe in things not having any rational basis.

There is always a gap between the propriety and reality. While, the propriety is fixed and the conclusions are drawn from the general yardstick of development, the reality is determined by the actual conditions available on the ground. The study of such yardsticks in a specific area enables us to find out the discrepancy between propriety and reality. The discrepancy decides the state of development.

Women in such an area represent the gaps between propriety and reality. An intensive study of conditions prevailing in the Katigorah constituency brings forth the level of discrepancy in the sphere of women’s political empowerment and their socio-economic development.

1.9 ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

The study is organized into seven chapters.

Chapter-1 : Introduction

It deals with a statement of the problem and the review of the literature. An explanation of the methodical frame of reference adopted for the study of the problem is given in the chapter.
Chapter-2: An overview of the study.

It deals with socio-economic development of women of Barak Valley with special reference to the women of the Katigorah Constituency and their relationships in the society and the Cachar district of which the Katigorah constituency forms a part.

Chapter-3: The Demographic scenario of the Katigorah constituency.

It examines the demographic patterns of women in the Katigorah constituency - the sex ratio, life expectancy, family size, infant mortality, literacy, participation in elections, school enrolment etc.

Chapter-4: Socio-economic survey of the constituency.

It focuses on the socio-economic status of women among different ethnic groups of the Katigorah Constituency.

Chapter-5: Constitutional provisions on women empowerment.

It focuses on the empowerment and implementation of the constitutional provisions i.e. 73rd Amendment of the Constitution and its effects on the women of the Katigorah Constituency.

Chapter-6: Non-Government Organizations and their role in the socio-economic development of women in the Katigorah constituency.
It examines the role of different NGOs working within the geographical limits of the constituency to improve the socio-economic conditions of women.

Chapter-7 : Conclusion

It presents a summary of findings from the studies made.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:


5. Ibid, p 53


G. Stanley Jaya Kumar (1994), *Changing Directions in the status and role of women in India*, pp. 53-54.

Ibid, p 56.

Ibid, p 57.


Chandana Saha (2003), *Gender Equity and Equality*.

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