1.1 PROBLEM IN BRIEF:

According to UN Women “More women in politics does not necessarily correlate with lower levels of corruption, as is often assumed. Rather, democratic and transparent politics is correlated with low levels of corruption, and the two create an enabling environment for more women to participate.” The participation of women in politics especially amongst the most backward regions of India and Assam in particular is marked by several challenges, which need to be critically analysed. In general, the issue of political participation and voting behaviour has been extensively studied by social scientists. Inspite of being extensively analysed by political scientists, substantial differences amongst members of the academia remains as to why people take part in political processes, what constitutes political participation, methods of participation and more importantly the impact it has in strengthening of a democratic polity. Analyzing the issue of political participation and voting behaviour
in context of India and more specifically Dhubri Legislative Assembly Constituency (LAC) of Assam is very significant, because it is overwhelmingly dominated by the Muslim community and it is one of the most backward regions of the country. The ‘char areas’ play an important role in determining the electoral outcomes in this LAC. Initial days of the region were dominated by the Congress Party but slowly AIUDF has become the more dominant player in the Parliamentary as well as in the Legislative Assembly elections. Though this region is politically important, issue of religious fundamentalism, economic backwardness and marginalization of women in key areas has hampered the progress of the region. This research work seeks to critically analyse the perception of women in char areas (Dhubri LAC, Assam) towards politics and elections and seeks to highlight the issues which shape their political participation and voting behaviour.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: WOMEN, POLITICS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE CHAR AREAS OF ASSAM:

Assam is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious state where Hinduism accounts for the majority of population, the Muslims constitute the single largest religious minority community who are scattered in all districts of Assam, with a high concentration of 70.4 per cent of the total population in Dhubri district, the westernmost part of Assam”(Ahmed, 2010, pp.2-27). Among the Muslims of Dhubri district, the char chaporı people constitute a significant number of the total population and they are one of the important communities of Assam. The term ‘char chaporı’ has been derived from Assamese language which is composed of two different terms namely, ‘char’ (River Island) and ‘chaporı’ (Riverine area). Regarding the construction of river islands i.e. char, two contradictory constructions have been observed namely- one is
the social construct of River Island (char) and other is the geographical construction of river islands. The former constructions of river islands are the result of various geographical and environmental factors while the later are the construction of the mainstream society. The geographical construction of river islands means braids of channel of river Brahmaputra and its tributaries are flowing through the areas making it hither isolated from the main land. The riverine areas of the River Brahmaputra are locally known as ‘char’ or River Island (Directorate of CADA, Assam).


“The Brahmaputra is the biggest river of the state. It is also one of the largest rivers of the world. The land of the world is mostly soft and during the monsoon the river is flooded with rain water and then it floods the catchment area of the river. The main channel of the river can’t contain huge flow of water. Consequently the river erodes huge land on the banks and become border like sea. When the flow is receded, the sediments gets deposited and created a number of sandbars and chars and it follow through different channels.”

The mighty Brahmaputra has been creating a number of chars in this way. Besides, there are a variety of other natural and geographical reasons for which the char areas have been emerging. The Assam Administrative Reforms Commission- Report (2005) says “The whole tract of river Brahmaputra covering about 800 km in Assam is having 3608 sq. km char areas” (4.6% of the state area).
TABLE 1.1 AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHAR AREA OF ASSAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts: An Overview of the Char Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Administrative Units</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaurlup</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naibari</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barpeta</td>
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<td>Golaghar</td>
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<td>Bongaigaon</td>
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<td>Dhubri</td>
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<td>Darang</td>
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<td>Morigaon</td>
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<td>Nagon</td>
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<td>Jorhat</td>
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<td>Jonpur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dhemaji</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tinai</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub Divisions</th>
<th>Karurlup</th>
<th>Naibari</th>
<th>Barpeta</th>
<th>Golaghar</th>
<th>Bongaigaon</th>
<th>Dhubri</th>
<th>Darang</th>
<th>Morigaon</th>
<th>Nagon</th>
<th>Jorhat</th>
<th>Jonpur</th>
<th>Lakhimpur</th>
<th>Dhemaji</th>
<th>Tinai</th>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaon Panchayats</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development Blocks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaon Panchayats</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Socio-Economic Survey report, 2003 by the Director of ‘Char Areas Development, Assam’

As per Survey report, 2003 by the Director of ‘Char Areas Development, Assam’ chars are distributed in 23 Sub-Divisions falling under 14 districts, with 2251 villages in 299 Gaon Panchayats and 59 Development Blocks. Among these districts, Dhubri has maximum 480 numbers of chars.

According to the Report of Assam Administrative Reforms Commission, 2005-

“The total population of the char areas is 24.90 lakh with 12.72 lakh males and 12.18 lakh females, i.e. 958 females per 1000 males, and the total number of families is 4.35 lakh of which 2.95 lakh (68%) are below the poverty line. The Char areas include Majuli with a population of 2.15 lakh. Density of population per square kilometre in char areas is much higher than average density in the State (690/sq. km. against State average of 340/sq. km.). The cultivable lands are measuring about 2.98% of the total land of the state falls under char areas. The char areas, like hill areas, border areas are also recognised as ‘Backward Areas’ in the Government records. The literacy rate in the char areas is 19.31 per cent. The literacy rate in Jorhat district (where Majuli is situated) is 60.55 per cent and for the other districts it varies from a minimum of 12.34 per cent for areas in Darrang district to the maximum of 18.50% for the areas in both Morigaon and Lakhimpur districts.”

[4]
The char chapori people are mostly Bengali Muslims. According to the 2011 census of India, 18% of the total state population of Assam is Bengali Muslims which are mainly concentrated in char chapori areas of Assam. It would be worthwhile to mention that these char chapori people have their origin in the Pabna, Naokhali, Mymensingh and Bagura districts of East Bengal of undivided India who migrated to Assam in the last decade of 19th century due to variety of reasons and settled in the riverine areas of Assam. It may be worth mentioning here that their migration to Assam created a huge hue and cry. They received mixed responses from the Assamese society and polity. Some were vociferously against their settlement in Assam while some supported it. At the same time a section of powerful leaders feared that their settlement in Assam might create identity crisis in Assam. They thought that if they were settled in the mainstream society it will be a threat to the Assamese and tribal identity. Keeping the diverse responses and consequences of the society in mind, the colonial ruler introduced a malevolent policy called ‘Line system’ to keep away the migrated people from the then east Bengal to assimilate with the mainstream society deliberately. As a result, they were compelled to inhabit themselves in the wet lands and riverine areas of Brahmaputra valley due to this line system, introduced by the colonial rulers in 1920.5

The term ‘char chapori’ Muslims dwell in the riverine tracts and river island of Brahmaputra valley and are often seen as ‘immigrants’. However, the term ‘immigration’ in Assam has been loosely defined by various social scientists, academicians and researchers. Literally ‘immigrant’ means a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country. But the char chapori Muslims did not come to
live in a foreign country. Most of the these landless Muslims have migrated to Assam during the colonial period from Bengal later on East Bengal (1905) and now Bangladesh, which was an administrative part of the then undivided British India. The signing of the Assam accord, 1985 now legalizes the validity of those who entered Assam before 25th March 1971. But their citizenship status has often been questioned from time to time. Unlike the mainstream section of the society, these char people are not socially, economically, politically and culturally privileged.

The people of char areas are deprived of some basic facilities like pure drinking water, electricity, proper health care facilities, higher educational institution, road connectivity and modern facilities like television, telephone line, internet, newspapers, magazines, postal services etc. Besides, there is huge rate of poverty, illiteracy, no family planning, underage marriage, and lack of female education which ultimately leads to abnormal Bengali population growth. Due to their poor and pathetic socio-economic conditions they are lagging behind in every steps of life. However, the government has not given due attention to the needs of the char chaporil Muslims and very often the same has been treated as vote banks by political parties. Again, the community has been harassed by different authorities and organizations in the name of detection and deportation of illegal migrants. Moreover, riverbank erosion has also deteriorated the socio-economic condition of this char chaporil Muslims i.e. Muslims living in the river island and riverine tract.

The char areas continue to remain one of the most backward regions of the country. There has been a slight increase of literacy from ‘15.45% during 1992-93 to 19.31%
during 2003-04, it was much lower than Assam’s overall rate of 53.79% and 50.48% in rural Assam in 2001. According to a baseline study, 

“In the Assam Development Report, 2003, Dhubri is positioned at the bottom of the list in terms of Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI index for the district is 0.214, which is the lowest in comparison to other districts of Assam. Similarly, the income index (0.102), education index (0.454), and health index (0.086) are also at the bottom of the list.”

The case is grimmer with the women who are living in the char-chapori areas of Assam—particularly in districts like Dhubri. The women in the char areas of Dhubri are neither economically nor politically independent. Their participation in the electoral activities such as participation in electoral rallies, election meetings, canvassing is very minimal. They mostly take into consideration the opinion of their husbands while they exercise their voting rights. Besides, their participation in the decision making process of their family is almost nil. They are mainly dominated by the patriarchal norms of the society which ultimately leads to their subjugation and marginalization. Their access to modern education, employment and development is insignificant. They are just being used as instruments of physical amusement and machines of reproduction by their husbands. They face serious health inequalities and problems which lead to several health hazards resulting in deteriorate health conditions. Therefore, it is imperative to study the plight of char chaporri women of Assam and to find remedies to meet out their problems for the betterment of the society because without women, a society can never prosper.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of District</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>78258</td>
<td>76250</td>
<td>154508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nalbari</td>
<td>42702</td>
<td>40900</td>
<td>83602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Barpeta</td>
<td>137708</td>
<td>130636</td>
<td>268344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>95521</td>
<td>91305</td>
<td>186826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bongaigaon</td>
<td>70345</td>
<td>65464</td>
<td>135809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dhubri</td>
<td>346996</td>
<td>342913</td>
<td>689909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>74269</td>
<td>68136</td>
<td>142405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Morigaon</td>
<td>47912</td>
<td>43412</td>
<td>91324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>45302</td>
<td>44501</td>
<td>89803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jorhat</td>
<td>109617</td>
<td>105478</td>
<td>215095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sonitpur</td>
<td>75119</td>
<td>70610</td>
<td>145729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>73216</td>
<td>70019</td>
<td>143235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Dhemaji</td>
<td>47689</td>
<td>43514</td>
<td>91203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tinsukia</td>
<td>27234</td>
<td>25371</td>
<td>52605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>1271588</td>
<td>1218509</td>
<td>2490097</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Socio-Economic Survey report, 2003 by the Director of ‘Char Areas Development, Assam’

As stated above there are 2251 villages that falls in char areas where women constitute 12.18 lakhs of the total population. The char chapor women bear an excessively large share of family burden. They are confined to household activities for family survival like making food for the whole family, supplying *tiffins* to the male folk working in the fields, helping the male folk in the fields, caring for domestic animals, clearing of cow-sheds, managing of fire-woods, rearing of children from morning till night etc.

According to the Assam Tribune (May22, 2012):

“The plight of the women of char areas in Dhubri district remains pathetic. Education is still a distant dream for the most of the women folk here. Literacy rate in char areas is ten percent, among which women’s share is about nil.” Furthermore, the Tribune also states “Women in these areas are seen as nothing but more as instruments of child birth and as domestic chattels. It has been unreservedly believed that, when a girl or a woman is not educated, along with her, the entire family and the society has to bear the adverse consequences. They have the high level of fertility and also the mortality rate. These lines are truly proved in Dhubri district, which
has the highest level of population growth rate with a figure of 24.44 which is much higher than the state average growth 17.07 percent. Both women and men are totally ignorant of birth control and contraception facilities. As a result population of the char areas is increasing at an alarming rate."

Some women also work as daily wage laborers and domestic help to run their family. Their contribution in the agricultural fields is very commendable but still they are lagging far behind their male counterpart. They do not get any recognition, neither in the society, nor in the family. They serve as unpaid laborers in the family without any privileges and position unlike the men folk. Their work remains undervalued and unrecognized. In spite of the intrinsic human value or use value of women’s work, it has never been recognized because it is not captured by exchange value. These women face various problems like poverty, illiteracy, early marriage, polygamy, lack of family planning, maternal mortality due to unsafe delivery, infant mortality, several health hazards etc. The women in the char areas also face serious discrimination- on one hand their socio-economic condition is worse and on the other hand; their citizenship status is also being questioned most of the times.

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND WOMEN IN CHARS OF ASSAM-A FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY:

The issue of political participation and voting behaviour continues to be a contested terrain. Some of the important questions that need to be highlighted while addressing the issue of political participation are-

Q1. Why do people participate in politics?
Q2. What are the methods through which people participate in politics?
Likewise, the issue of voting behaviour also leads to several questions.

Q1. What are the issues that people take into consideration while voting in elections?
Q2. While voting, do people vote according to party, candidate of issue preference?
Q3. Does voting really matter for women belonging to a marginalised community?
Q4. What are the factors that influence voting behaviour?

These are some of the limited questions only, and deeper scrutiny of these key issues will reveal that both these are multi-dimensional concepts. Having a comprehensive definition of political participation is never easy for it involves praxialist as well as teleological argument. Derived from the Greek word ‘praxis’, the praxialist argument revolves around ‘procedural engagement’ which focuses more on the procedures. Taking part in the voting, joining political organizations, joining protests are all procedural aspects of political participation. However, the teleological arguments which focus on ‘goal oriented behaviour’ largely seek to influence government action and policies and the nature of involvement does not seem to matter much.

For example, Huntington and Nelson (1976, p.3) defined political participation as an “activity by private citizens designed to influence government decision-making” whereas Verba et al. (1995, p.38) characterized it as an “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.” The praxis does not seem to be important enough in the context of these definitions in as much as they are mainly teleological in nature.
The 2015 Report by Lokniti, CSDS (New Delhi) *Democracy in India – A Citizens’ Perspective*, points out that forms of participation may be characterized as electoral participation and extra electoral participation. It argues that though it may not be considered as ‘active engagement’, yet people following news and discussing political events may also be considered as a measure of political participation. Furthermore, ‘civic participation’ may also be seen as a form of political engagement.

Understanding political participation and voting behaviour in India is a complex phenomenon. Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar in *Ten theses on state politics in India*, (Seminar) argue that ‘states have emerged as the effective arena of political choice’ and it ‘is at the level of the state that the voters make their choice’. They further argue that “Higher and more intense political participation at the state level has widened the base of democracy and sustained its legitimacy without enriching the quality of democratic outcomes.” According to studies such as National Election Studies (NES 2004) conducted by the CSDS (New Delhi), there is a high positive correlation between levels of literacy and interest in politics. Comprehending the nature of political participation and voting behaviour of people belonging to backward regions is much more difficult to apprehend. Much of the literature and theories of political participation has been written and applied more in understanding the societies and politics of the western world. Electoral studies conducted by CSDS New Delhi, Weiner and Kothari’s collection of papers (1965), Wallace and Roy’s collection of papers (2003) etc. have pointed out that socio economic status like gender, caste, religion, education and income were important in explaining political
awareness, exposure to political propaganda use of personal effectiveness in politics, and party preference.”

The issue of political participation and voting behaviour become more complex when we see it from a feminist perspective. Women and their views have always been marginalized from mainstream politics, yet they have voted in large numbers in the electoral process, it is generally assumed that voting is a rational act and is driven by issues of development. However, it is a reality that in India, primordial factors deeply influence the voters and determine their attitudes towards politics and society. There is an urgent need to understand politics and power relations from the ‘standpoint’ of the women on the margins whose life is often dictated by issues of poverty, religion, patriarchal forces and illiteracy. The knowledge and experiences of Muslim women in char of Assam can be a starting point for research because their needs, attitudes, opportunities and wants are very different from the mainstream perspective. Standpoint feminism, a feminist theoretical perspective largely argues that knowledge is socially situated and questions the positivist school of inquiry.

However, no comprehensive study has been done on political participation and voting behaviour of women in char areas of Assam. This research work seeks to fill up this existing vacuum and highlight their trends and forces that shape voting behaviour and participation. Furthermore, evaluating the nature of political participation and voting behaviour amongst the women in char areas will have to be seen in social contexts where religion, poverty and patriarchal forces that play an important role. No particular mainstream theory of political participation is capable of explaining the
social reality in char areas in a comprehensive manner. The social structure of the chars is fundamentally dominated by patriarchal norms where the subordination of women by their male counterparts is the existential reality. As such, this research work has tried to explain the nature of political participation and voting behaviour of Muslim women in char areas from a feminist ‘standpoint’, wherein their lives and knowledge was at the centre of all inquiry.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To analyze the nature of political participation of women in char areas of Assam.
2. To analyze the electoral trends and voting behaviour of women in char areas of Assam.
3. To examine the role of social institutions and forces in determining voting behaviour and modes of participation of women in politics in char areas of Assam.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

In order to achieve the above mentioned objectives, this work has addressed the following research questions-

1. What are the nature and dominant modes of participation for women in politics in char areas?
2. How does voting behaviour vary in case of state and national elections?
3. What are the most dominant issues and forces which guide voting behaviour of women in char areas of Assam?
4. With reference to women of char areas, how does political empowerment affect social empowerment?

5. While voting rights have ensured ‘procedural empowerment’, what are the strategies required to ensure ‘substantive empowerment’ of women in char areas?

1.6 METHODOLOGY:

The research was conducted in Dhubri district which has the highest number of chars amongst all the districts of Assam. It was confined to the study of chars under Dhubri LAC.

- Use of mixed methodology:

To study issue of political participation and voting behaviour in char areas, a mixed methodology approach has been adopted. The study has incorporated a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research where both primary and secondary sources of data have been used. In the initial stages of the research, a number of journals, books, newspapers, government reports, etc relating to chars and women has been studied in order to gain knowledge about the position and issues of political participation and voting behaviour of women and living in the char areas. However, since there is lack of sufficient secondary sources, the research has relied upon primary sources and in depth study based on field survey has been done to understand the nature of participation, strategy for voting and expectations of women in Char areas of Dhubri in Assam.
• **Feminism and feminist research:**

Feminism and feminist research has always been at the forefront of challenging the dearth of women’s voices in research which have had inferences for women. Feminist research has also played a crucial role in foregrounding grave enquiries into gender, gender relationships and society. One of the major contributions of feminist theory and activism has been the expansion of the definition of “politics” beyond formal institutions in the public sphere to include informal activities, like social movements, and the private dynamics of everyday life. This research work seeks to look at women’s involvement in informal activities in char areas. Feminism looks beyond statistics and ‘research must be part of a process by which women's oppression is not only described but challenged.’ Through redefining various viewpoints and perspectives, feminist research adopts various methodologies and seeks to achieve both, to empower women and to problematise yet again by knowledge, reason, objectivity and validity. This study concentrates around the lives and experiences of women in char areas, and hence life stories, personal interviews and case studies have been part of this research work.

• **Narrative Methodology:**

The "feminist standpoint" research seeks to employ a wide variety of qualitative research methods such as participatory observation, consciousness raising methods, in-depth interviews, group diaries, documenting oral narratives and testimonies, photography or "talking picture" techniques, etc.
This research work too follows similar goals and adopts techniques of interviews, focus groups discussions and participant observation. In addition to other tools of qualitative research, this work was based on narrative methodology. Narrative approaches are not appropriate for large studies but rather the focus is on the relationship between the researcher and the subject. Narratives ‘capture both the individual and the context.’  

As such ‘narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was.’  

Most narrative inquiries begin with asking participants to tell their stories, either in one-to-one situations or in groups where “participants are asked to tell their stories in a variety of ways: by responding to more or less structured interview questions; by engaging in conversation or dialogue.” Interviews can also tell us how women felt about what they did and can interpret the personal meaning and value of particular activities.  

Issues of empowerment of women and their participation in politics needs to be deeply analysed and it is here that narrative methodology became important for it told us life stories of women living in the margins of the society.

**Field Study and Interview Schedule:**

The field study was done in the char areas of Dhubri district in different phases which was spread over three years, and quantitative methods were employed especially to analyse the General Elections (2014) and Assembly Election (2016). The primary data was collected through field study and participant observation method where a structured interview schedule
comprising lots of thematic questions was used. The interview schedule acted as a guide in collecting data on quantifiable variables like age, educational qualification, economic and health status, level of participation in the political field etc. The schedule was translated into the local language i.e. Bengali and the interviews were administered in Bengali which is spoken by majority of the people of this char. After conducting the interviews, the responses were translated into English for the purpose of data analysis. Use of the likert scale and matrix type questions was used to analyse the views of the electorates. With due permission from the respondents, the interviews were recorded in a voice recorder. Focus group interviews played a critical role in understanding women’s perception on politics in the char areas.  

- **Sampling method:**

  There are 186 polling stations in Dhubri Assembly Constituency. Out of them, 54 polling stations fall in char Areas.

  1. A multi-stage sampling method was adopted for the research work. *Firstly*, out of the 54 polling stations, 4 polling stations was identified through purposive sampling methods on the basis of their uniqueness. *Secondly*, once the four polling stations were selected, women voters were identified and segregated from the electoral rolls. *Thirdly*, once the population is segregated, 50 respondents from each of the 4 selected polling stations were randomly selected. Thus, 200 respondents were identified and their views were analysed and scrutinized. This method was followed for
conducting the two field surveys *i.e.* General Elections (2014), Assembly Election (2016). A total of 400 respondents were part of the research study.

2. Women Presidents of Gaon Panchayats in Dhubri District were interviewed. (Annexure ‘List of Gaon Panchayats in char areas of Dhubri District’ enclosed).

- **Research Tools:**

  The use of interview schedule was imperative to analyse the issue of political participation and voting behaviour of women in char Areas in Dhubri Assembly Constituency.

  Additionally, the following research tools were used:
  - Interviews with the women electorates;
  - Focus group interviews with the women voters;
  - Case studies.

- **Pilot survey:**

  A pilot survey was conducted in Bhasani char in August 2014. This pre-testing helped to add some more alternative options in the interview schedule. It also assisted the researcher to avoid any unnecessary repetitions in the schedule for the actual study.

- **Data entry and analysis:**

  Data entry and analysis was done through the use of SPSS21.
1.7 CHAPTER PLAN:

1. Introduction to the research study:
This chapter puts forward the broad framework of the proposed thesis. The objectives, research questions, theoretical framework, review of literature, methodology and significance has been highlighted.

2. Political Participation and Voting Behaviour: Theoretical overview and conceptual framework:
This chapter analysed the major theories which deal with key concepts such as political participation and voting behaviour. Furthermore, it sought to explain the adequacies of such theories in understanding complex societies like that in Assam, more particularly in char areas of Dhubri District.

3. Women and Political Participation: Trends, Linkages and Challenges:
This chapter highlighted the role of women in electoral politics in Assam. It brought forward the growing trends of women as voters in the different elections, more specifically the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections. Analyzing the lives and experiences of women from a feminist standpoint, this chapter argues about the political choices and behaviour of women in peripheral regions.

4. Electoral Trends and Voting Behaviour with especial reference to Dhubri LAC:
This chapter concentrated more on the nature of political participation and voting in Dhubri LAC in Assam. It highlights the growth of AIUDF and the decline of the Congress party in the char areas of Dhubri LAC.
5. Voting Behaviour and Political Participation of Women in Char Areas- A Field Study:
A field based empirical study played an important component of this chapter and it also highlighted the nature and modes of participation of women in char Areas. Furthermore, the importance of various issues and forces that shape voting behaviour was the main focus of this chapter.

6. Empirical findings-Theoretical inference:
This chapter analyses the findings from the field study from a feminist standpoint theory. It argues that experiences and political choices of women in char areas have to be understood from their standpoint.

7. Conclusion:
This chapter highlights the broad conclusions as well as sum up the key arguments of the research based on mixed methodology and reflect on the reality of women voters in char areas of Dhubri LAC. This chapter sums up the broad challenges faced by women in char areas of Dhubri LAC.

8. Suggestions –Strategies ahead:
This chapter critically evaluated the measures taken by the government in strengthening the role of women in political sphere. The women in char areas of Dhubri LAC face unique set of problems and therefore this chapter highlighted the effectiveness of state response in political empowerment of women. The chapter also contains suggestions which seek to provide remedial measure to strengthen women’s voices in public and political life.
1.8 REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Literature review is a fundamental element of every research. It enables us to ask specific questions, identify gap areas and highlight contribution of writers to the field of enquiry. However, in case of char women in Assam it is difficult to prepare a comprehensive literature review. This is because of two reasons- first, the study materials published so far revealed that there is lack of academic oriented literature on char chaporoi women and secondly the mainstream researchers have not paid serious attention about the plight of char chaporoi women in Assam. However, issues of political participation have been well documented more from a ‘western’ perspective.

In India too, several studies have also been done to analyse elections and voting behaviour. The Lokniti Programme under Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi (CSDS), has made studies such as ‘National Election Studies (NES) (1967–2014), a series of State Assembly Election Studies (1995–2011), State of the Nation Surveys (2006–11), the State of Democracy in South Asia Study (2005–7) and a series of Studies of Indian Youth (2007–11).’ Likewise important contributions to understanding of elections and voters in India has also come from social scientists like Pradip Chhibber, Wallace and Roy, Gould and Ganguly’s collection of papers etc.

1.8.1 Literature on Political Participation and Voting Behaviour:

Lawrence A. Scaff, Two Concepts of Political Participation, *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Sep., 1975) analyses ‘The central problem of political participation then becomes, "Who takes part in what, when, how?"’. According to
Scaff, “tone concept of political participation stresses the idea of public membership, of citizens” sharing” justice and orienting their actions toward a "public” or "common good” and the second concept of political participation is more closely related to” influence and power than to justice and community, for it stresses the idea of protecting one's rights and advancing one's interests within a competitive context.” Ultimately politics is about ‘communication and justice as well as competition and influence’.

Sanjay Kumar and Praveen Rai’s *Measuring Voting Behaviour in India* (2013) analyses the different schools of thought associated with measuring voting behaviour and political attitudes. It provides an historical overview of the election studies in India and highlights the importance of survey method in pre and post poll analysis of elections. It points out the major limitations of analyzing data and highlights the challenges ahead for election studies in India.

Michael A. Jones-Correa and David L. Leal , Political Participation: Does Religion Matter?, *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Dec., 2001), arguing in context of Latin American countries, Corea contest Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) posit that ‘variation in ethnic group political participation, while related to socioeconomic differences among them ,is derived from the acquisition of civic skills through their associational memberships and ,in particular, from their experiences in church’. The goal of this article was to understand role of religion in American political life, particularly for Latinos.
Robert H. Salisbury, Research on Political Participation, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May, 1975), pp. 323-341 argues that there are several contrasting strands of tradition and perspective regarding the meaning of participation in a society. First, political participation is seen as a legitimate act where citizens participate in government affairs; second, instrumentally, political participation is seen as a necessary means of obtaining political power, and thirdly, participation is seen as a solvent of social conflict. Focus on political participation must raise questions of ‘motivation and rationality’.

Praveen Rai in his article ‘Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2011 argues that there has been a marked increase in their voting turnout and election campaigning amongst women. Affirmative action has helped increase womens’ representation at the grassroot levels, but more needs to be done.

Ashutosh Kumar in his article ‘Moving beyond nation-state: Framing state-level politics in India’, *India Review* (2017) argues that states play an important role in national politics. He emphasizes “The upsurge in identity politics has reconfigured the democratic politics of India in the last three decades in a significant way, as diverse social groups in India have increasingly been politicized and mobilized on the basis of social and political cleavages rather than on the basis of their common economic interests, ideology or policies.” Social divisions based on religion, caste and identity politics will shape state politics and will impact national politics too.
The article ‘Facts and Fiction about How Muslims Vote in India’ in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (2016) by Rahul Verma and Pranav Gupta, based on study of Uttar Pradesh, argue that ‘Muslims participate in electoral arena—that they vote in large numbers, their decision of whom to vote for is influenced by clerics, they are more concerned about religious issues while voting, and are less supportive of India’s political institutions.’

Jan W. van Deth, A conceptual map of political participation, *Acta Politica* Vol. 49, 3, 349–367 argues that ‘A more pragmatic approach is needed based on the identification of indispensable requirements for some phenomenon to be recognized as a specimen of political participation.’ Furthermore, ‘political participation is an abstract or general concept that covers voluntary activities by citizens usually related to government, politics or the state.’ In addition, these activities can be aimed at solving community problems or, in even more general terms, they can be ‘attempts to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour’ being ‘devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity’ or aiming to ‘induce significant social reform’.

Cindy D. Kam, Carl L. Palmer, Reconsidering the Effects of Education on Political Participation, *The Journal of Politics* (2008), argues that while positive relationship is interpreted to mean that education confers participation-enhancing benefits, be it through the acquisition of cognitive abilities that enable comprehension of political content, the development of civic skills and civic orientations that foster political action, or through the attainment of socioeconomic status positions that facilitate mobilization into participation. But for Palmer, relationship between higher education and political participation derives not from higher education per se, but from pre-adult characteristics.

Yukio Maeda, External Constraints on Female Political Participation, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, (2005) written in context of Japan, this article examines the gender gap in political participation in Japan. Although previous studies indicate that women may face several external constraints on political participation, it goes on to argue that men and women encounter very different working conditions and family circumstances at certain stages of their lives, which create a gender gap in political participation.

Jan Teorell, Political participation and three theories of democracy: A research inventory and agenda, *European Journal of Political Research* (2006) argues that “Based on a threefold distinction between responsive, participatory and deliberative models of democracy, the article first distinguishes three conceptions of political participation: as influencing attempts, as direct decision making, and as political discussion.”
Edward N. Muller article *An Explanatory Model for Differing Types of Participation*, European Journal of Political Research (1982), using 1974 survey data from Federal Republic of Germany, he argues that democratic participation and aggressive participation are distinct types of political behaviour and there is an need for an integrated model to explain both kinds of behaviour.

Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America-Political Democracy and Social Equality* (1987), represents one of the largest studies to analyse ways in which citizens participate in American political life. They distinguish ‘four kinds of political participations: voting, campaigning, communal activity and interaction with a public official to achieve personal goals.’

Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) argues about conditions under which ‘economic theory could be applied to non-market political decision making.’ It focuses on what is rational, given the relevant incentives, for government to do. He also argues that parties in a two party system change their platforms so that they resemble one another; whereas parties in a multiparty system try to remain as ideologically distinct from each other as possible.

Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality- Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, (1995), analysing the society and politics of America, it argues that democracy is rooted in ‘civic voluntarism—citizens’ involvement in family, work, school, and religion, as well as in their political participation as voters, campaigners, protesters, or community activists.’ This researched study illuminates studies on civic activity and also focuses on the ‘central
issues of involvement: how people come to be active, their motivations, their resources, and their networks.’ Accordingly, ‘some individuals have a greater voice in politics than others, and that this inequality not only results from varying inclinations toward activity, but also reflects unequal access to such vital resources as money and education.’

1.8.2 Literature on Gender and Women:

The book titled “Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal” authored by Mahua Sarkar is an in depth and ground-breaking study of how Muslim women in colonial Bengal came to be more marginalized than Hindu women in nationalist discourse and subsequent historical accounts and sets out to scrutinize how Muslim women have been produced “as invisible and oppressed/backward in the written history of late colonial Bengal.”

The essay “Understanding Patriarchy” by Bell Hooks is very helpful in understanding the theoretical dimensions of patriarchy and she argues that it is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak. Hooks argues that psychological patriarchy is a “dance of contempt,” which has ‘covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation’.

“The Rights of Muslim Women in India” written by Anju Talukdar and Rajesh Deoli is a compilation of the judicial pronouncements, legislations and personal laws most relevant to Muslim women. This book addresses various aspects of rights, including
constitutional rights, rights within the criminal justice systems, specific laws relating to girls and women, and Muslim personal laws. The author believes that Muslim women face double discrimination in India: gender discrimination from traditional patriarchy, and discrimination against religious minorities which result in their exclusion and oppression in large numbers. The book has also dealt with the various schemes related to women like IGMSY, RGSEAG, etc. along with some remedies in laws. India’s progressive Constitution and several ‘pro-women’ laws and judgments have failed to achieve justice for those women from minorities primarily because of their lack of knowledge of their rights and the lack of effective support in accessing those rights.

“The Second Sex” by Simone de Beauvoir focuses on how feminity is constructed and how women became ‘the other’ in a Patriarchal society. She argues in her book that women’s existence is a social construction and every woman is not born as a woman, she becomes a woman. Here she tries to find out the causes of the unequal relationship between man and woman.

The book entitled “Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India” written by Zoya Hassan and Ritu Menon is based on a nationwide survey of over nine thousand women and it highlights the relative roles of gender and religion discriminating women in general and Muslim women in particular. It also studies the situation of Muslim women in terms of their work force as well as their role in the decision making process. The question of understanding 'cultural differences' and minority rights' is one of the central themes of the book and it also explains that there is not
much difference between Muslim women and Hindu women in the level of education but Hindu society is more progressive than Muslim. In terms of workforce, the participation of Muslim women is very low which has a negative impact upon their autonomy and status. Through the survey, the authors also made a comparative analysis of the Muslim women with other communities and came to the conclusion that the Muslim women in comparison to the women of other communities are being treated as unequal citizens in India.

“The Creation of Patriarchy” by Gerda Lerner explores the origins of women’s subordinate roles to men in society. This book opened with a discussion of the significance of history for human consciousness and psychic well-being. The author believes that it was men who wrote and interpreted the record of the past and they have primarily focused on the deeds, actions, and intentions of males thereby disregarding the deeds and actions of women.

*In a Minority: Essays on Muslim Women in India* (eds) Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2005) is a collection of ten essays which seeks to ‘map the diversity of women’s lives in India’. The last few decades have focused on issue complex such as Muslim Personal Law and its related areas such as triple *talaq* and polygamy. A baseline study of all India Muslim Women’s Survey reveals that “muslim identity” is a ‘heterogeneous identity’ produced at the intersection of class, region and gender’. The issue of ‘public’ and ‘private sphere’ is blurred and the survey shows that ‘religion does not influence Muslim women’s status significantly, but poverty does so.’ Amongst other subjects, this book deals with status and
empowerment of Muslim women focusing on states of Kashmir, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and also how media has portrayed Muslim women. However, this book does not deal with empowerment and status of Muslim women in Assam where there is a substantial Muslim population. It must be recalled that in Assam, especially in the char areas, the issue of purdah, polygamy and triple *talaaq* does not shape their identity, but it is poverty and illiteracy which are the major challenges for women of char areas.

1.8.3 Literature on Women and Panchayat:

Nirmala Buch, *Reservation for Women in Panchayats: A Sop in Disguise?*, (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol-XLIV-No.40, October 03, 2009), argues that ‘If the Women’s Reservation Bill is passed, the women who will enter Parliament and state legislatures as a result will come from a different class than their counterparts in the panchayats, particularly the village panchayats, and it will be difficult to ignore their impact on policymaking and in supporting women in the panchayats when they are present in a critical number. While the reservations in panchayats pose no threat to the positions of the national and other senior political leaders, the reservations in Parliament and state legislatures will result in sharing of power and leadership with their female peers, a prospect that their patriarchal mindset does not welcome.’

Manu Bhaskar, *Women Panchayat Members in Kerala A Profile*, (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XXXII NO. 17 April 26, 1997), analysing the issue of women in panchayats in Kerala, it argues that with “regard to entry into politics, variables like age, occupation, income, are decisive. The factors that contribute to politics also vary
with factors such as religion, income, party membership and occupation. The influence of party is strong during elections; while it plays rather an insignificant role in motivating women into politics. Those factors which help women to enter as panchayat members are personal qualities and party support. Moreover the nature of political orientation and involvement in social organisation also enable them to make inroads to the political pinnacle at the grass tools level.”

Dhanmanjiri Sathe, Stephan Klasen, Jan Priebe, Mithila Biniwale, *Can the Female Sarpanch Deliver? Evidence from Maharashtra*, (Economic and Political Weekly, vol xlviii no 11, March 16, 2013) paper looks at the “relationship between the gender of the sarpanch and the availability of services. Using survey data from Sangli district in Maharashtra, it finds that the availability of basic public services is significantly higher in female sarpanch villages compared to the male sarpanch villages when the former have been in the job for three to three-and-a-half years.

The importance of women in representative bodies lies in the perception that the presence of women in such bodies will bring about a change in the mindset of policy makers and issues of women will be given higher priority. Furthermore, the presence of women in decision-making positions will lead to the elimination of discrimination against women, etc. in the paper *Reservation for Women Challenge of Tackling Counter-Productive Trends*, Medha Nanivadekar, *(Economic and Political Weekly, Vol-XXXIII No.28, July 11, 1998)* This paper however argues that “What needs to be understood is that reservation *perse* does not guarantee effective participation of women. Several complementary processes need to be initiated for fulfilling the
objective of the policy of reservation. An artificial measure like reservation will ensure only quantitative participation of women. There is no guarantee that these women would behave in a way conducive to the overall empowerment of women”.

Sudha Pai, *Pradhanis, New Panchayats Field Notes from Meerut District*, (Economic and Political Weekly, XXXIII, No.18, May 02, 1998), analyses the role of elected pradhani’s in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh) and argues that reservation has not really helped changed the status of women in North India. According to her, “reservation” alone cannot change the status of women in the family and society and thereby ensure their participation in local bodies. The study also shows that rise in family income and improved lifestyle, due to better educational qualifications, or investment in business by male members does not make a difference. The position of women, and the perception that they have little knowledge about and are incapable of taking part in public affairs, even of independent voting, remains strong. The pradhanis in our sample villages are mere namesake representatives of the male members of their household.”

### 1.8.4 Literature on Immigration and Char-Chaporri People:

For the general and basic understanding of the state of char chapori Muslims in Assam we can approach book “*Char-Chaporir Jiban Charyya*” edited by Ismail Hussain (sr). This book clearly describes the state of char chapori people inhabiting in the Brahmaputra valley- their way of life, problems and prospects. It also discussed the causes responsible for worsening the conditions of these char people. The book has also made a detailed analysis of the consequences of river bank erosion and how it
deteriorated the socio-economic status of the people living in char areas. But the book has failed to highlight upon the effective measures which need to be undertaken in order to make improvements in the socio-economic status of these down-trodden people.

Another book by Gorky Chakraborty titled, "Assam’s Hinterland: Society and Economy in Char Areas" helps us to understand the concurrent issues concerning the life and livelihood patterns in the char areas and also points out the immense contribution made by the char dwellers in the process of transformation of the wastelands into granaries, and thereby the economy of the state. However the state has failed to acknowledge their contribution and this region continues to remain backward. The author finally sums up with some broad policy measures for improving the socio-economic condition of the char dwellers of Assam.

The thesis “Dhuburi Zilar Char Anchalar Samajik Aru Sanskritic Jivan: Ati Adhayan” written by Akhtarul Islam is an in depth socio-economic and cultural study of Dhubri district. The writer has made a comprehensive analysis of the char people of Dhubri district, their socio-economic status, cultures and traditions, language and literature etc. this thesis helps us in understanding the lives of people in char areas of Dhubri.

Anindita Das Gupta in her article ‘Char‘red for a lifetime: Internal Displacement in Assam Plains in India’ (South Asia Refugee Watch, 2001-02) has given a detailed description of the issue of immigration and internal displacement. She examined that most of the IDPs from the chars of the Assam plains are Muslim farmers of East
Bengal origin established in the river islands and banks of Assam by the British since the last decade of the nineteenth century. She highlights the challenges faced by the char people as well as their sense of deprivation. She also believes that the powerlessness of these char people make them tremendously vulnerable to exploitation. She concludes by emphasizing that an unambiguous policy approach should be taken by the state to neutrally address the issues of these char people.

The book “Immigration and Assam Politics” by Alaka Sarmah is an attempt to understand the discourse of the so-called immigration problem in Assam and the subsequent politics of the state. The book begins with a historical and geographical background of the state i.e. Assam and how the name Assam has been originated. The book deals with the policies of Muslim League and congress party on the immigration issue. The author gives a statistical account of the growing population of Assam by using sound census report published by the concerned authorities and the immigration policies of two dominant political parties namely the Muslim League and the congress. The author also clearly analysed the role of the Sadullah govt. (who came into power in 1937) and how the govt. patronize and encouraged Muslim immigrants by allotting bighas of land to settle in Assam. The author also tries to describe very vividly the problem of immigration and its possible threat to the culture and identity of the mainstream community and how the sense of insecurity polarizes the society on communal lines. Although the author tried to highlight the socio-economic and political implication of the immigration problem, focus has been mainly given upon the political implication of the problem and how this problem has influenced the policies of different political parties. The book has also emphasized on whether this
problem led to the foreigners’ movement in Assam. The nature and support base of the movement in a very authoritative and precise manner has also been discussed. Especial mention has also been made about the responses of the left political parties such as CPI, CPI (M), CPI (M-L) and also the role of regional political parties on the foreigners’ issue. This is a very authoritative book based on sound analytical understanding. The author tries to analyze each and every issue associated with the immigration problem very critically and the stand of political parties on it. Hence, this is a must read book for all who are working on immigration, Assam politics, Assam movement, char chaporoi people etc.

The “Muslims of Assam” by Kasim Ali Ahmed is an attempt to portray the socio-cultural life of the Muslims of Assam in the folk level, beginning with their advent into Assam. While the study encompasses the whole of Assam, it dealt more particular with Western Assam. Again, emphasis has been given on the erstwhile Goalpara district for an intensive study. This book aims at imparting an understanding and creating awareness among the people regarding the identity of the Assamese Muslims, wherein the peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding, communal harmony, assimilation, cohesion and integration are fairly manifested. The book has made an in depth study upon the Muslims of Assam-their socio-religious festivals and ceremonies, village structure and physical folk-life, social folk customs, the socialization process etc. The socio-cultural life, including all aspects of Assamese Muslims, exhibits a peculiar synthesis of Islam and the local folk tradition of Assam. Although the socio-religious life of the Assamese Muslims is broadly guided by the Islamic principles, there is no reason to deny the appreciable impact of indigenous
folk cultural tradition on the Muslim standard of living. Thus, the Muslims of Assam, especially the Assamese Muslims have established themselves and obtained their religious identity. Through the very long process of interaction and assimilation covering several centuries, they have reached in such a stage that they neither could completely disown their past nor could their cultural and other local influences be so easily wiped out. Obviously their present existence follows that they are Assamese first and Muslims afterwards. Thus it can be reiterated that the socio-cultural life of the Assamese Muslims shows a remarkable atmosphere of co-existence and mutual interaction. It’s a very comprehensive book and has made immense contribution to study of Muslims of Assam.

Again, in the book *Asomr Rajnitit Musalman (Muslim Minority in Electoral Politics of Assam)* by Dr. Monoj Kr. Nath makes a critical analysis on how minority politics emerged in Assam. It also discusses the role of Muslim minority in the electoral politics of Assam, what are their issues and concerns. The author also critically analyses the policies and programmes that have been introduced by the government of Assam for the benefits of minority and firmly believes that due to the negligence of the government for a long time the muslims have failed to get benefits out of those policies and programmes and hence there has been no improvement in the socio-economic status of the Muslims in Assam. This book is very helpful in understanding the nature of electoral politics in Assam as well as the insignificant role of the government.
1.8.5 Literature on Feminist Standpoint Theory:

Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland’s *Feminist Methodology-Challenges and Choices* (2002) highlights the importance of feminist methodology and feminist research. It points out the limitations of scientific methods and stresses on objectivity and relativism. It examines the importance of standpoint feminism and stresses on the ‘politics of difference’.

N. Yuval-Davis (2002) article *Standpoint theory, situated knowledge and the situated imagination* in *Feminist Theory* introduces the notion of the ‘situated imagination’ and ‘situated knowledge’. The thrust of this article is about the continued complex relationship between ‘methodological individualism’ and ‘communitarianism’. It further argues that ‘hegemonic ‘universal’ knowledge has tended to ignore and render invisible marginalized experience, imagination and knowledge.’

the view that women (or feminists) occupy a social location that affords them/us a privileged access to social phenomena’. The key conclusion is that knowledge is ‘located’ and reality is too complex to be understood from only perspective or narrative.

Kristen Intemann in her article *25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where Are We Now?* published in *Hypatia*, 2010 argues that there cannot be one criteria to understand every research context and normative values too become important in analysing lives of women. The two central arguments of ‘The Situated-Knowledge Thesis’, and ‘The Thesis of Epistemic Advantage’ guides this work. Focus on the ‘insider-outsider’ method of enquiry is crucial to understanding of needs of women.

Marjorie L. Devault, *Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis* in the journal *Social Problems* (1990) argues that researching on women’s experiences will require ‘listening to respondents, transcribing and editing interview material, and writing about respondents' lives.’ A ‘women's standpoint’ does not imply that all women share a single position or perspective, but rather there is a need to understand and follow the implications of women's (and others') various locations in socially organized activities.

M. Hawkesworth, (1999). *Analyzing Backlash: Feminist Standpoint Theory as Analytical Tool* in *Women's Studies International Forum*, argues that ‘feminist standpoint theory may provide feminist scholars with new conceptual means to engage contemporary political issues’. Hawkesworth further ‘explores the
contributions and limitations of standpoint theory as an analytical tool and as a method to engage pressing political issues.

Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka’s *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Springer, 2003), contains a collection of essays on feminism. According to Nancy Hartsock, ‘Women have a distinctive perspective on reality because their experiences are different from those of people who occupy other positions in society’. Just as Marx’s understood the world from the ‘standpoint of the proletariat enabled him to go beneath bourgeois ideology’, so a feminist standpoint can help us ‘understand patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations.’

Susan Hekman’s, *Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited* in *Signs*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter, 1997) argues that feminist standpoint theory raises a central and unavoidable question for feminist theory: How do we justify the truth of the feminist claim that women have been and are oppressed?’ She argues that ‘knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced’. She highlights the’ politics of difference’ based on ideas of ‘situated knowledge’. Karen Houle article *Making Strange: Deconstruction and Feminist Standpoint Theory Knowledge That Matters: Feminist Epistemology, Methodology, and Science Studies*, in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (2009) argues that ‘democratic and diverse methods of knowledge-making amount to better knowledge’ and it ‘might
make the world work even better.’ Indeed ‘giving voice to the silenced’ may be one of the important steps.

1.8.6 Review on Ph.D Thesis:

In order to understand the origin of the east Bengal Muslims who are commonly known as char Chaporil muslims we can approach the PhD thesis entitled “Emergence of a Community: the Muslims of East Bengal origin in Assam in Colonial and Post-Colonial Period” by Dr. Anindita Dasgupta (2000). Here the researcher explains how the malevolent policies of the British colonial rulers encouraged the wage laborers and peasants to settle in Assam in order to increase their revenues. The writer also describes how migration led to the personal benefits of the Britishers. This thesis made immense contribution in understanding the whole issue of migration.

Golam Hazrat Ali Ahmed’s thesis, The Char Area Muslims of Barpeta District: Problems and Prospects, deals with the problems and prospects of the char area Muslims of Barpeta district. It begins with an introduction to the historical background and growth of Muslims in Assam. The thesis focuses upon the economic life and political problems among the masses. The thesis also highlights upon the socio-economic problems like lack of education, market and proper health care facilities, poverty, unhygienic livelihood, superstitions, uncontrolled birth, dominance of Dewani or Matabbar etc. In conclusion, the author suggests some remedial measures for socio-economic development of the char as well as for the eradication of political problems. However the author has failed to provide a detailed account of the specific problems faced by the women of this char which needs serious attention.
because without the development of women, a society cannot develop. But nevertheless, this thesis has made immense contribution in understanding the problems of char area Muslims.

Nur Rahman Bhuyan in his PhD thesis entitled “Living at the periphery: A study of Muslims of Takimari River Island near Indo-Bangladesh Border” describes the difficult lives of the people inhabiting near the international border between India and Bangladesh. He also gives a clear picture of the harassment by BSF jawans upon the people of the island. He has also thrown light upon the socio-economic conditions of the people living there and focused on the educational and political scenario of Takimari River Island.

1.9 SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY:

The scope of this research study is a micro-level study. Being the first full doctoral study on political participation and voting behaviour of women living in Char Areas, it has some major limitations also. Very limited literature is available on this important area of research; therefore much of the data was generated from field based study.

While most of the literature on political participation and voting behaviour is dominated by western writers and theories, there are major limitation in applying such theories to understand social reality of women in Char Areas of Dhubri LAC in Assam. While it may not be comprehensive enough to fully grasp the problems faced by women in char areas of Assam, since this study is based on views expressed by a
limited number of respondents, it generates enough data for further enquiries and give us important directions about political culture and the state of politics in char areas from women’s perspective.

1.10 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Political participation and voting behaviour is intimately linked to policy outcomes. In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen speaks of the freedom to participate as being a key form of development. For Sen, “Participation can also be seen to have intrinsic value for the quality of life.” Again, the most fundamental purported individual-level reward from participation is “increased autonomy, which is a cognitive, emotional and behavioral sense of independence”. Thus the study of ‘political participation’ is intimately linked with structural conditions and essentially shows the nature of political culture and working of democratic institutions and the growing expectations of citizens. But the critical aspect of studying political participation is the issue of inclusiveness, especially when women are marginalized in patriarchally dominated backward regions of Assam. This study seeks to analyse the complex relationship between women and political participation in one of the most backward regions of Assam. According to the Socio-Economic Survey Report concerning the char areas of Assam (2003-04), Dhubri district has the highest number of char villages and char population followed by Jorhat and Barpeta. The chars are the home to 9.37 per cent of the state’s population and cover 4.6 per cent of the total land area of the state and the char villages account for one of the largest concentrations of illiterate population in Assam. When compared to Socio Economic Survey Report (1992-93), the 2003-04 report states that the population residing below the official poverty line increased
substantially from 48.89 per cent to 67.89 per cent, during which, poverty rates for the state of Assam declined to 36.09 per cent. Thus, the char areas are probably one of the most backward regions of Assam, and issues of poverty, flood and citizenship have dominated the lives of people.

While several works have been done to study political participation, there has been no significant work to analyse the nature of participation amongst women in the char areas of Assam. The issue of voting behaviour also leads to several questions relating to inclusiveness, marginalization, partisanship, autonomy as well as legitimacy of state institutions. This research work, though limited, has tried to deeply scrutinize the complex relationship of women, political participation and empowerment at the grassroots levels in one of the most backward regions of Assam.
ENDNOTES:


3 For details see Administrative Reforms Commission Report, 2005.

4 For details see Administrative Reforms Commission Report, 2005.


8 The Assam Tribune (May 22, 2012). Plight of women in Char areas of pathetic.

9 Ibid.


11 Ibid.p.23.


24 Transcripts of the Focus Group Interview have been enclosed as “annexures”. Please note, due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed, names of women have been changed to maintain their privacy and security.

25 For more details are available at http://www.csds.in/lokniti