CHAPTER VI

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS-THEORETICAL INFERENCE

“In discussing the rights of women, we are to consider..what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny..”

Louise A Tilly and Patricia Gurin
Women, Politics and Change, p. 3
Russell Sage Foundation (February 26, 1992)

The debate over ‘objectivity’ and ‘relativism’ in research leads to the importance of standpoint theory. While the view ‘personal is political’ is substantially a major dominant theme for the feminists, there are substantial differences in experiences of women and they have different position or ‘standpoint’ on controversial issues. ¹

Analyzing the complex relationship between women, electoral politics and political participation in the char areas of Dhubri LAC is rather complicated because of the different variables that shape, influence and determine the nature and intensity of political behaviour. Women face multipronged challenges. As Zoya Hasan notes, "Muslim women are triply disadvantaged-as members of a minority, as women, and
most of all as poor women.\textsuperscript{2} Illiteracy and poverty is a near uniform phenomenon in the char areas, and deprivation, marginalisation as well as discrimination has been internalized by women. It is in this context that this relationship between political participation and gender empowerment must be examined.

Feminist research seeks to empower as well as emancipate women; furthermore it ‘is connected with the issue of feminist struggle and it challenges that basic structures and ideologies that oppress women.’\textsuperscript{3} However, ‘much of feminism has grossly neglected the variety of women’s experiences by treating the observations and problems of Western, white, middle-class, married, heterosexual women as paradigmatic concerns for women.’\textsuperscript{4} As a source of knowledge, experiences of women matter and according to Nina Gregg, ‘In the place of distance, detachment, neutrality, and generalization, feminism locates engagement, lived experience, women’s perspectives, and specificity as the bases from which we comprehend the world.’\textsuperscript{5} Indeed, experiences of women are very subjective and it is grounded in a particular geographical space. While feminist research essentially ‘tends to accord a great weight to accounts of women’s subjective experience,’\textsuperscript{6} it however springs forward an important debate on ‘interpretation’ of women’s experiences and lives. The "insider" versus "outsider" debate, i.e., whether it is more effective to conduct fieldwork as an insider or an outsider to the communities the researcher is studying\textsuperscript{7} highlights the complexity of the problem. The importance of feminist standpoint theory lies in its ability to ‘bring alternative categories and criteria of truth that would create alternative accounts of society and contribute to a positive change in social relations.’\textsuperscript{8} According to Alison Wylie-

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Feminist standpoint theory has a contentious history. It is an explicitly political as well as social epistemology, characterized by the thesis that those who are marginalized or oppressed under conditions of systemic inequity may, in fact, be better knowers, in a number of respects, than those who are socially or economically privileged. Their epistemic advantage arises from the kinds of experience they are likely to have, situated as they are, and the resources available to them for understanding this experience.9

Bilic while analyzing the lives of women from minority cultures stresses the need that ‘understanding society through the lens of women’s experiences leads towards constructing a feminist standpoint.’10 Indeed, understanding lives and political choices and opinions of women in char areas in Dhubri LAC have to be understood from their perspective.

The participation of Muslim women in politics is generally low and primordial factors such as religion and customs have defined their nature of involvement. During the freedom struggle too, unlike the Hindu women, political space for Muslim women was extremely limited. Parties like the Muslim League hardly gave any space for engagement of Muslim women in the political sphere. Contemporary India has seen women occupy important positions but it has been an exception rather than a norm. The relationship between gender quotas and empowerment of women is an area of further research and more insight needs on this sensitive issue especially when ‘women’ as a category is not a homogeneous unit. However, this research work reveals that reservation of seats for women at the Panchayat level has helped bring about ‘visibility’ of women in formal institutions, but the issue of marginalization in the private sphere continues to be a norm; internationalization of such norms coupled with lack of civic knowledge has further marginalized the women of char areas.
6.1 VOTING BEHAVIOUR: RATIONAL ACT VERSUS SOCIAL IDENTITY:

Citizens’ participation and engagement matters, for it makes democracies more strong and legitimate. The Preamble to the constitution of India starts with “We the people”, essentially implies that the goals of the Indian state are to be achieved in a collective manner for a greater purpose. However, status of women in India continues to be a debate and patriarchal norms have impacted lives of women in different ways. For women at the margins of society, community interests become more dominant because of her dependence on the same over the years. Batra and Reio Jr. have argued that ‘India is a collectivist society where individual needs are sacrificed for the benefit of the group and this sacrifice is primarily made by Indian women for their families. Traditionally, and importantly, although the Indian patriarchal culture views a woman as a member of the family or a group, she is not viewed as an individual with an identity of her own.’\(^{11}\) This contradicts the idea of a ‘rational’ voter. Rational choice theories assume that voting is a rational act wherein the voter knows the benefits of participation and is linked with the resources they control. Rational choice theory has been a target of criticism by several feminist scholars, they accuse rational choice theory of assuming a selfish, separative, and non-emotional actor who is masculine, thereby ignoring the connective, altruistic, and emotional motivations, claimed to be characteristically feminine. \(^{12}\)Rational choice theory is only a partial explanation to understanding voting behaviour because often citizens consider themselves to be part of a greater community rather than think of voting as an individual independent act and ‘often may view political life through the lens of their group identity’. \(^{13}\)Johura Bewa (65 years, Majir Char) says, “I want my people to do better in life and only then we can prosper together. Individually, politics does not
matter to me, but my community’s voice is important and its needs have to be met by the government.” 14Similarly, Aliya Khatun (22 years, Majir Char) says, “Our religion requires us to follow the wishes of our husbands, so I vote according to his preference.”15Rohima Khatun (41 years, Majir Char) who got married when she was just thirteen years old, can barely remember political issues being discussed by her parents; she has voted in every elections, panchayat, state and general elections, has always followed her husbands’ lead and firmly believes that her ‘kaum’ or community’s interest is foremost and her vote just revolves around the issue of protection of her community identity. 16 The younger generation women and those who have had exposure to education and control of economic resources, even if in a limited manner, tend to be more critical of state policies and their officials.

6.2 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC KNOWLEDGE:

Voter turnout continues to be healthy in all types of elections-Panchayat, Assembly or General elections, but voters are mostly passive. This is especially true in char areas where voter turnout is more than 75 percent in elections, but voters are hardly aware of politics, candidates, policies and programmes. Again, gender difference matters, men are more politically oriented compared to women in char areas. Moreover women residing in such areas are more ill-informed, less knowledgeable and less politically oriented. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) in their study found that gender difference does matter when it comes to issues of voting behaviour and political participation; men participate more in political activities which range from campaigning, political affiliation, knowledge and interest on politics. Additionally,
the study by Portnet found that ‘parental influence’ also determines how a voter connects with the political system in terms of political and community engagement.\textsuperscript{17}

The participation of women in politics is dependent upon the ‘social and material costs’ as well as the ‘necessary information and possession of civic skills’.\textsuperscript{18} Women often undertake work which ‘assume a disproportionate share of the child-rearing responsibilities in almost all households and ‘women are substantially more likely than men to be poor’.\textsuperscript{19} Under such conditions, women have very little bargaining power and become more dependent on men in the family.

Studies done from different parts of the world reflect that civic knowledge and political participation is closely linked. The finding by K. Beauregard is not new and this research work only reconfirms the earlier findings done across countries. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, it presents the argument that more proportional systems may send signals that multiple interests are included in the policy-making process, which may increase women’s levels of political participation and thereby reduce gender gaps.\textsuperscript{20} Based on the NES 2004, the hypothesis that ‘Increasing levels of education for respondents will positively influence their general interest in politics’\textsuperscript{21} holds true when applied to understanding the relationship between education and women in char areas in Dhubri LAC. Likewise, while studying education of Muslim women of Kerala, Menon highlights that the ‘practice of early marriage which is widely prevalent among the Muslim Community is found to be another major factor preventing the women from continuing her education after marriage.’\textsuperscript{22} The same situation exists in the Char. During the field study, Nazira Bibi (41 years, Bhasani Char), who got married at the age of 14, says, “My father wanted
to get me married even before; all my friends got married very early. Mine was late.  

Very few women were found to be literate in the two field survey conducted. However, those who had a little education, were found to be more aware of government plans and policies, and in general were more vocal. What is very clear is that lack of civic knowledge has further marginalized women of char areas in the domain of politics and political participation. In Assam too, very few Muslim women have been elected as MLAs and at the grass root levels, the women representatives are not well ‘equipped’, in terms of civic knowledge, education and structural support. Jesmin Ara, a panchayat representative of Motichara GP says, “I give thumb signatures where required, besides my views are not taken seriously by the men folk.”

While the voting percentage of Muslim women has increased, the qualitative level of such participation is a matter of debate. Indeed this study does provide the base for further research which will analyze the relationship between gender equality and electoral reforms.

Literacy rate in char areas increased from 15.45% during 1992-93 to 19.31% during 2003-04, which is much lower than Assam’s overall rate of 53.79 and 50.48 in rural Assam in 2001.  The 2014 field study revealed that:

- 69% of the respondents did not know the full form of AIUDF
- 73% could not name their local MLA
- 87% could not name the President of India
- 93% of the respondents could not name the Governor of Assam
Furthermore, the field study done in 2016 in Bhasani Char reveals that there is low levels of political awareness and civic knowledge is very poor. Perhaps poverty, social norms, religion and illiteracy have been major obstacles to qualitative participation of women in politics. Snehalata Panda argues "Women lack in the psychological traits required for political participation. Their needs are fulfilled in private rather than public spheres."  

Literature and case studies on political participation reveal that there is a ‘knowledge gap’ which prevents women to play a pro-active role in politics and it subsequently leads to low levels of political participation. Research studies have shown that individuals who are educated, are more likely to use of news media and are likely to shape community preferences. Knowledge gap essentially implies that knowledge is a fundamental resource in society and “knowledge equals power”; those who have knowledge, are more likely to reap the benefits provided by the social system and may be more likely to be successful in asserting their interests. But in the char areas, in spite of ‘knowledge gap’, women do take active part in the act of voting, but remain ‘spectators’ in other perspectives of participation.

6.3 WOMEN, ELECTORAL CHOICE AND GRASS ROOT PARTICIPATION:

Campbell and his associates (1964:29) argue that ‘women have been socialized into a politically passive role; it results in large part from a set of norms that women hold that they should not participate as much as men, that politics is a man's game.’ There is a ‘gender deficit in politics’ in the char areas. The issue gender deficit, which from
this researcher’s perspective implies that there are structural barriers which prevent women from playing a more effective role in politics, is the hallmark of politics in the char areas. The answer to addressing such a complex problem is multipronged wherein voters have to be informed and ethical; secondly an enabling environment has to be created wherein structural barriers to political participation can be overcome.

Studies done by Dahlerup reveal that ‘while quotas are adopted as a strategy for advancing women’s political involvement, it does not follow that women, gender relations, or the status of the political institutions are affected or changed in a positive way.’\(^{30}\) Perhaps, it holds true to some level especially when understanding the linkages between empowerment of women and their representation at the grass root levels in char areas of Dhubri. While more women are now visible in the Panchayats, substantial empowerment of women remains a little far. Studies reveal that globally there are certain stereotype images of male and female candidates. In studies conducted in the USA, there are stereotype perceptions and images about male and female candidates.\(^{31}\) There are certain perceptions towards the ‘sex of the candidate’ which women of Char areas have; women of this region have doubts regarding the capacities of women representatives. Perhaps this stems from the fact that women in Panchayats in this region have not been able to perform their duties properly. Rohima Khatun of Majir Char says, women are always limited in their mobility and seldom can do things or approach people to get things done. Sometimes, their views are also not taken seriously in Panchayat meetings.\(^{32}\) But all is not so bleak. While the performance of grass root representative have been questioned by many in the chars,
there are substantial number of cases which reveal that inspite of limited support from state bodies and social institutions, women representatives have tried their best to put forward the collective needs of their standpoint. The voices from grass root representatives too are getting stronger. While women have been skeptical of the performance of the women representatives at the grass root level, women like Fulnehar Begum, the Gaon Panchayat President of Birshing Jarua have shown that there is enough scope for women to make their contribution to society. Fulnehar Begum has crusaded the cause of sanitary facilities for women in her village and through her sheer hard work ensured that street lights were installed as well. She recalls, “When I became a panchayat member, I did not get adequate support from the other male members of the panchayat, but now, not only women, but men also listen when I speak.”

Jahnabi Bibi of Bina char Gaon Panchayat says, “Often women come to me to solve their family problems. The Gaon Panchayat is not well equipped or meant to deal with such problems. But I try my best to resolve familial disputes. People cannot afford to go the court. Polygamy is common in our char, and it does lead to problems. But women cannot afford to get involved in fighting court cases and seldom have time to resolve it. We try to resolve some problems in a limited way.”

Hafiza Begum a Gaon panchayat member of Molakhua Block is of the view that women have to be stronger and vociferous when it comes to protection of their rights and privileges. Begum recalls the moment when she stood up to speak for the first time in the panchayat office. She says, “I was so overwhelmed and confused on my first day at office. But when I spoke about the need for women to be more active in generation of resources and have more control over their personal lives, it was greatly applauded by the small group of women who had come to see me. The men too were
slightly apprehensive about the things I said, but gradually over a period of time, now they treat me as their contemporary rather than as an outcast.”

Perhaps, collective voice of women in the chars will only be heard when grass root institutions are strengthened. While, women representatives do perform ‘ornamental’ functions, the fact that they have been approached by women electorate of the chars to address their problems reveals that it is the only institution where there is some connectivity and proximity between women and their representatives. The initiatives and responses by the women representatives to meet the needs and challenges of the chars reflect that there is no lack of effort by women representatives, but rather the support system continues to be hampered and constrained.

6.4 RELIGION, PATRIARCHY AND POLITICS:

While personal laws have been anti-women, reforms of the same should be undertaken with care. According to Zoya Hassan, ‘There is agreement among feminists that all religious personal laws are discriminatory and must therefore change. There are, however, disagreements over the means to achieve this objective, whether through a state-sponsored civil code or internal reform.’

The research work reveals that issues of ‘triple-talaaq’ and other rights of the ‘private arena’ is an issue of limited importance for the char areas. For them, issues of economic empowerment and enhancement of their lifestyles is more important. Saira Banu, a 36 year old mother of 5 children and a resident of Bhasani Char says, “People in this Char co-exist with each other. Polygamy is common but we women have adjusted to it. We have nowhere to go to. We have to live in this society and in this place. Most marital issues are resolved by the village elderly and the religious leaders. The government
must address issue of our poverty and employment rather than dealing with our religion. My husband barely earns enough to sustain our family of seven.”

The general view is that religions, whether Hinduism or Islam, have seldom given women the same privileges or right when compared to men. According to Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, who though a cross national study in the Middle East, argued that marriage serves as an ‘economic substitute for paid employment in the workforce’. Likewise, Iverson, Torben and Frances Rosenbluth argue that patriarchal norms are accepted by Muslim women because it is linked with areas which are dependent upon agricultural produce. It is sexual division of labour which tends to lead to subordination of women and it is subsequently such norms are internalized and socialized. Studies reveal that patriarchal structures and lack of income, education and poverty are few of the underlying causes of poor political participation of Muslim women in India. The women of char areas face severe challenges in terms of economic deprivation as well their inability to control resources. Again, very often women themselves justify such differences which disempower women. Often marriages serve as a means for overcoming poverty and unemployment. The field study done in the char areas too reflect this predicament faced by women. Saira Banu says, “My husband does all the earning for the family, hence it is my duty to obey him, the Holy Quran also says so. My duty is to support him, unequivocally.”

The underlying feature of the economic conditions of people in char areas is poverty. Women not only face gender based discrimination but they also do not enjoy the fruits of their labour and economic rewards for their hard work is always spent for the
family first. Indeed, ‘gender arrangements are often naturalized’. The issue of ‘sacrifice’ for the family and for the community is paramount and therefore whenever income is generated, it is often spent on maintenance of the large families and a small donation to the local community mosque. The women of char areas are most daily wage earners, who work as daily maids, labourers and workers in nearby incense factories. In spite of working relentlessly, their economic conditions have seldom improved and in general remain oblivious of the material and economic gains made by their counterparts across the state. As a result they remain very vulnerable and this has resulted in creation of a ‘Muslim’ vote bank wherein ‘religion’ becomes the centrifugal force which integrates community and ‘poverty’ tends to attract populist slogans and propagandas by political parties and leaders.

The Religious leaders in char areas have played an important part in shaping political perception and opinions. Johura Bewa (60 years, Majir Char) says, “The religious leaders openly tell us whom to vote for. We do not question his opinion for he is a religious scholar and what he says is always right. We always visit the religious leaders whenever we face familial problem.” Essentially, the religious leaders have a strong hold over not only political opinions but they also play the role of family counselors and adjudicate disputes between families. The wearing of head scarf is never a problem for the women and neither is the ‘purdah system’. Women in char areas have internalized various social customs and have accepted them willingly without ever questioning their utility or their ‘discriminatory’ character. The char women have not heard of ‘Muslim personal law’ per se; for them whatever is decided by the village religious leaders is the law which they follow. The fear of social
ostracism guides the behavior of women in the private as well as the public domain. Johura recalls, “I never complain of any domestic abuse because it will lead to my social ostracism”. Essentially women and their lifestyles are challenged from “three levels - as women, as Muslims and as members of a backward minority group. Besides, they also suffer as members of a leaderless community.” Johura Bewa further says, “If any woman faces any problem, the village elders, Gaon Sarpanch and the religious leaders solves the same. We accept it as we do not know whom to approach. We are poor too, we can’t go anywhere else.” The women of char areas often have to make tough decisions- community needs versus individual choices. There is never any doubt that community concerns overrides individual wants, but often voices of protest can be heard. The clamour for change is growing and women, especially those between the age group of 18-40 years. The women of this group are getting more vocal and often issues of reforms of personal laws are being highlighted by them and social norms are being questioned. For Sajida Bibi (18 years, Bhasani Char), the issue of reforms of marriage laws and abolition of ‘triple talaq’ is important. She says, “I will never accept such unacceptable traditions. In today’s world, such laws are redundant and have got no space’. She is not alone. Rohima Kahatun (23 years, Bhasani Char) says, “Why do only women have to face such problems and challenges? We do so much for running the house, yet our voices are ignored.” The issue of reforms of personal laws is rather tricky because the women also relies that the society is not yet ready to accept radical changes. However, it does represent a dilemma for the women of the char areas. Women do not have the economic resources or the adequate courage to seek help of formal state institutions to help their cause. The public institutions such as police and courts are not seen
favourably and ‘lack trust’ by the women of the char areas. Therefore, seldom are radical steps taken by women and community interest and norms are preserved. Amina Khatun (20 years old, Majir Char) says, “Social norms have guided our behaviour. I find it difficult to accept at times, but everybody follows it”.\textsuperscript{48} Patriarchal norms are strong, and so too are voices of the religious heads in the chars. The women have accepted such social norms, some out of necessity and some out of choice. But the focus group interview and personal interviews conducted reveal that social norms will be questioned more often than the past. The newer generations will challenge the norms set by the village elders and religious heads.

It must be recalled that women of char areas seldom have a choice when it comes to issues of contraception or control over parental property. Again issues of domestic violence are seldom spoken openly. However, in the focus group interview, where the interaction of the researcher with the women in the focus group was more at a personal level, women were more forthcoming about their emotions, experiences and needs in the private sphere. The families in char tend to be rather large with nearly every household having 4-5 children. Kubun Bibi (42 years old, Kuntir Char) says, “Everyone has to have 4 children, it is like an unwritten rule. It is not something I am personally in favour of, but after the initial years, children do help us out and also we have long term goals for them. Running the household is difficult with so many children, but what can I do. I have limited choice.”\textsuperscript{49}

The voice of women in the private sphere is rather ‘low’, but it definitely is gaining momentum. The women panchayat leaders have shown that the needs and wants of
the women can be articulated at the grass root level. With proper support and strengthening of state institutions, the standpoint of women in char areas can become clear over a period of time. Patriarchal norms will be challenged in due course of time and as women become more active in public sphere, issues of the private sphere will come under greater scrutiny. Essentially, women of Chars lead a ‘trapped life’ where in social norms have been internalized and qualitative change in their lives have been rather slow.

6.5 **ELECTORAL ISSUES AND VOTING:**

Voting as dominant mode of political participation for women of char areas continues to be very high. Other forms of political participation are very low. What drives women in Chars of Dhubri to vote in large numbers is not so much linked with issues of governance, but rather it is the fear of being disenfranchised. The controversial IMDT act and the fear of being treated as Bangladeshis have encouraged people of the Chars to exercise their franchise earnestly. It must be highlighted that a post-poll survey done by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) shows, while the Hindus appear to support the scrapping of the Act, the Muslims, especially Bengali Muslims, favored the Act.50

Illegal migration to Assam and issues of identity politics resonates in the politics of Assam. During the period 1971–1991, Assam’s population increased from about 15 million to about 23 million. Out of this, while the non-Muslim population grew at the rate of 45.39 per cent that of the Muslims rose by 77.42 per cent. During 1981–1991, the three border districts of Dhubri (71 per cent), Cachar (56 per cent) and Karimganj (58 per cent) recorded a very high increase in the Muslim population.51 Again, sons-
of-the-soil conflicts in Assam — in which communities considered to be “autochthonous,” fight against ‘outsiders’ over identity, politics, resources and territory has stretched the fragile composite culture of Assamese society.\(^{52}\) This constant fear of the Muslims dwelling in Char unites them together and thus become easy target for political parties who treat them as ‘vote banks’. The field study shows that majority of the women, especially those above the age group of 40 years in the char areas are ‘retrospective voters’ rather than ‘prospective voters’, where in they vote for the party based on past experience and reward it accordingly in the forthcoming elections.\(^{53}\) The fear of disenfranchisement and the promise delivered by the AIUDF in protecting their community from being disenfranchised so far, has helped consolidate the AIUDF amongst this group of people.

### 6.6 POLITICS AND GENERATIONAL CHANGE:

Based on age wise segregation of data on women and political participation reveal that women in the char areas between the ages of 18-40 are more likely to be politically active when compared to women above the age of 40. Perhaps it is due to the fact that the younger generation comparatively possesses higher civic knowledge when compared to women above the age of 40. It may be also linked with education, as the younger generation (18-40 years) is more literate compared to women in midlife.

The field study reveals that political opinions and perception towards politicians are slightly changing among the different generations of women. The women between the age categories of 18-40 were more prospective rather than a retrospective voter.
This category of women also looked at issues beyond the issue of citizenship and ‘employment’ was also a factor while deciding to vote.

The exposure to civic knowledge and education, increasing use of social media and political awareness will slowly result in a more ‘informed voter’ for the next few years. The field study shows that women voters in the age category of 18-40 years are more critical of the performance of the ruling parties and political representatives. Manjura Khatun (20 years, Bhasani Char) says, “If I don’t find meaningful employment in the next years, I will shift my political allegiance”. Likewise, Saleha Khatun (18 years, Bhasani Char) says, “Why should I vote for a party who does not give me any benefit.” This is in sharp contrast to the women of 40-50 years age category who have traditionally aligned with a political party.

6.7 ECONOMIC RESOURCES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

Putnam’s work that showed strong linkages between civic engagement and participation in politics. Putnam in his seminal work ‘Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy’ (1993) argues that there is a strong linkage between ‘social capital’, which essentially consists of networks based on trust and mutual reciprocity, and governance. Perhaps, a deeper analysis will reveal that participation of women in politics is also linked with economic resources. “Resource effect” implies that there is an implicit relationship between the level of resources and political engagement of women. Studies conducted in the west reveal that ‘Political participation research has repeatedly shown that high socio-economic status, i.e. high income, education and professional status, fosters political involvement’. If we apply this same logic in studying the relationship between political participation and
women in Border States of India, especially those in the char areas, it actually is the opposite. Here in spite of possessing low income and resources, the level of political participation, especially the formal aspect of participation, mainly confined to voting in elections, is unusually high.

The field study reveals that those women who are engaged in some form of community work or profession, which enables them to leave their homes, are more politically oriented when compared to women who work at home. Safia Khatun, an ASHA worker who resides in Bhasani Char, helps women facing small medical problems, says, “Ever since I started getting a salary under the ASHA programme, my outlook towards government policies have become more sharp and I know the basic dilemmas faced in delivering public services by government institutions. Most ASHA workers have some basic knowledge of the facilities being provided by the government.” Incidentally, there are more than twenty two ASHA workers residing in Bhasani char. The field study reveals that if women have access to education and economic resources, tend to be more vocal on state policies and question state representatives.

6.8 **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT:**

Women’s political empowerment is ‘a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making’. It is linked with a variety of factors which includes institutional support and reforms as well as enhancement of quality of life. As such, employment opportunities, health and security for women of marginal communities will reflect the issue of empowerment. A study revealed that “In West Bengal, women complain more often than men about
drinking water and roads, and there are more investments in drinking water and roads in GPs reserved for women. In Rajasthan, women complain more often than men about drinking water but less often about roads, and there are more investments in water and less investment in roads in GPs reserved for women”. In the chars of Dhubri LAC, 81% of the respondents answer nature’s call in the open, often near the river banks.

While studies in Rajasthan shows that ‘the presence of women representatives at the lowest level of governance, where they have greatest proximity to potential crime victims, is more important in giving voice to women than their presence in higher-level leadership positions.’ In this study conducted in the char areas, reveals that there is a trust deficit towards the institution of ‘police’ and women try to solve problems without resorting to the formal state institutions. In 2016, as many as 1,657 cases of crime against women were registered under eight police stations of the Dhubri district, making an average of more than 4.5 such cases registered by police every single day. Many cases go unreported for the fear of being shamed by the society. According to Sultana Salima Ahmed, a human rights activist, “women in the district are often discouraged from working and becoming self-reliant, which compels them to be dependent on their family or husband, and are thus compelled to silently tolerate all the injustice inflicted on her”. While most of the women Presidents face their own challenges, they have a very clear idea about the things and issues that need to be done earnestly for empowering women. Social norms clearly guide the behaviour of women in char areas. Nearly all
the women interviewed during the course of the study, have remained ‘mute spectators’ in political activities. But positively, women who earn income have been found to be more open to social ideas and political issues. Nearly 40% of the respondents are involved in some kind of daily wage earning activity and for this group of women have often spoken about issues of property inheritance, government schemes, and household expenditure in the private domain. Again only one-fourth of the respondents have received primary education, and this group of women says that, the issue of good governance and performance of the ruling party at the state matters.

The strengthening of grass root bodies will be a critical factor in pushing forward the knowledge, experiences and needs of the women of char areas. Perhaps initiatives to strengthen the capacity development of women representatives at the grass root level will prove to be vital for protection of rights of women in the long run. Women representatives at the grass root levels have to become role models for other women and hence their capacity development programme becomes even more important. While issues of voting behavior and political participation is largely determined by issues of religion, still it cannot be generalized as the younger generation, who are more ‘prospective voters’, are willing to experiment and ask questions to state institutions. Stronger women representatives will also mean better implementation of state policies and programmes. Jesmin Ara, Gaon panchayat member of Motichar Block says, “I have ensured that women are able to open bank account numbers in their names and I also see the implementation of construction of the roads in our village.” Her effort has not gone unnoticed and Mamta Begum of Gauripur Block too has taken turns to see that the construction of roads in her village takes place
without any delays or corruption. Mamtaz Begum says, “if we monitor personally when the roads are being made, the contractors to their work more diligently. Therefore, women of our village often take turns to see the construction of roads in our village.”

The women Presidents’ of Gaon Panchyat have argued that schemes such as NREGA need to be more frequently monitored by external agencies. Issue of corruption and lack of accountability in implementation of government schemes is in the long run hurting the office of the Gaon Panchayat. In issues of administration, many women Presidents of Gaon Panchayats have argued for training programmes for the Panchayat members and rules and regulations for handling government schemes should be made simpler and gender friendly. Many schemes such as NREGA have got special provisions for women but they continue to remain absent in reality. In the field study done in the Char, Anjuma Begum, the Panchayat President of Patamari GP says, “We are merely handicapped representatives and seldom the men folk take us seriously. But women have approached us on issues of sanitation and toilets, but we hardly have any funds at our disposal to help in building of public toilets”.

The need for capacity building programme for grass root representatives is the need of the hour.

The key to empowerment of women of char areas lies in promotion of education and making schemes more gender friendly. The field study has shown that those women Presidents who are more educationally qualified have been more forthcoming on suggestions regarding government schemes and their implementation. They are more politically aware but are yet confined within social norms. Furthermore, women who
have been engaged in income generating activities, beyond their family household work, have found to be more aware of changing trends in politics and vote more judiciously. Getting more women involved in employment and making schemes more gender friendly can only have long term positive impact for women of char areas of Assam. Indeed, the standpoint of women of char areas is best articulated at the grass root level where visibility of women is becoming prominent than ever before. It may be a small change, but definitely it will have long term positive ramifications.

6.9 WOMEN, POLITICS AND CHOICES: THEORY AND PRACTICE:

Women as a category of analysis is not homogenous as their needs and experiences are varied and spatially located. For women, the ability to exercise choice is dependent upon three inter-related dimensions of – resources (pre-conditions), agency (processes) and achievements (outcomes). In each of these dimensions, it is very clear from the field study that women of char areas continue to be rather ‘invisible’ and marginal. While ‘feminists’ have talked about gender equality and the need to oppose patriarchy as well male supremacy, the question of understanding and interpretation of experiences of women remains a matter of debate. Issues in the private domain, especially those like triple talaaq, contraception, property rights, religious beliefs and gender relations have been an area of contention for Muslim women. While the BJP and its allies are arguing for reforms in Muslim personal law and doing away for ‘primitive laws’; field study shows that there is a remarkable divergence in what women of Char women want and what state institutions seek to deliver. The need for research in this sensitive topic from a feminist standpoint
perspective is essential for it provides a new dimension at looking at politics and political participation from the standpoint of the marginalized.\footnote{67}

Analyzing issues of gender relations is linked with understanding the lives and experiences of women; it is the starting point from which knowledge is generated. Feminist standpoint scholars argue ‘Knowledge is always socially situated’\footnote{68} and there is the need to understand ‘women’s lives, as they themselves experience them, in order to achieve an accurate and authentic understanding of what life is like for women today.’\footnote{69} Such an understanding became popular in the early 1980s, ‘having grown out of the ‘second wave’ of feminism in Europe and the US; it stresses that ‘different experiences of marginality have the potential to shed light on different forms of oppressive social practices’\footnote{70}. Hartsock argues, feminist standpoint expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations.\footnote{71} Feminist standpoint theorist offers a critique of theories constructed by men who put themselves in the position of policy makers\footnote{72} and further helps understand as well as explain the world through the lens of marginalized, subordinated and oppressed women and the need of ‘mainstreaming their knowledge, skill and experiences’.\footnote{73} The dichotomy between what policy makers and political executive envision on one hand and needs of women of char areas on the other hand is adequately highlighted in the field study. As Krosnell argues, to understand the position of women in society ‘we must contextualize individual experiences and isolated events, putting them in a larger context of social structures and relations so that gendered practices become visible.’\footnote{74} Muslim women of char areas have a different perspective on issues of socialization and internalization of social norms, gender relations, and religious as well as other personal laws; they should not be
judged from a liberal or a radical perspective alone. Scholars like Kumkum Sangari has argued that issues of reforms in personal laws is not just a question of reforms from within or from state intervention, rather it is the issue of ‘acknowledging the presence of multiple patriarchies and therefore an issue of the inalienable rights of women cutting across religion, caste, class, region, sects etc.’\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, the decision of Char women on personal issues have to be respected rather than being ‘judged’ for they have a different way of looking at society and social norms. The needs of Char women are not solely dominated by ‘triple talaaq’, religious reforms or inheritance rights alone, but it is rather dominated by economic well-being and communitarian goals. Their ‘rational’ political behaviour act is dominated by fears of being marginalized and disenfranchised rather than by individual welfare. Issues of development, literacy, corruption has gained momentum. Small changes are visible at the grassroots level and more women are asking questions pertaining to performance of state policies, development and needs of women. The strengthening of panchayats will prove to be a vital factor is representing the standpoint of women staying in the chars. Strong communitarian values guide the political behaviour of women of char areas and any sort of state intervention to reform and address personal or gender relations have to be done through adequate caution and respect for the same.
ENDNOTES:


9 Wylie, A. *Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters*, Proceedings and Addresses of the APA86:2, p. 47


23 N. Bibi, personal communication, 24, January, 2018

25 Literacy declining in Assam’s char areas. Retrieved from http://www.nezine.com/info/Literacy%20declining%20in%20Assam%E2%80%99s%20char%20areas, accessed on 15.9.2018


31 L. Huddy & N. Terkildsen. Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 37, No. 1., pp.132-133


33 F. Begum, personal communication, 12 August, 2017

34 J. Bibi, personal communication, 17 August, 2017

35 H. Begum, personal communication, 20 August, 2017


43 J.Bewa, personal communication, October 18, 2017.


45 J.Bewa, personal communication, October 18, 2017.

46 S.Bibi, personal communication, May 18, 2017

47 R. Khatun, personal communication, 29 May, 2017

48 A. Khatun, personal communication, 12 June 2017

49 K. Bibi, personal communication, 16 June, 2017


“Geschiere and Jackson (2006, 1–5) defines the term “autochthony” as a very loose, binary qualifier that focuses only on who is in and who is out based on the relatively vague argument of who originates “from the soil itself.”” In Vandekerckhove, N. (2009) We are Sons of this Soil- The Endless Battle over Indigenous Homelands in Assam, India, Critical Asian Studies 41:4, p. 524


“The supporters of the prospective theory such as Gerald Pomper, Norman Nye, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik contend that voters, or at least American voters, are reasonably well organized intellectually, that they are conscious of major issues, and that they vote to maintain or change specific policies—that is, they vote prospectively in expectation of certain policy outcomes…. Writers who discuss issues, ideologies, and policies in connection with elections tend to assume implicitly the accuracy of this theory. The contrasting school suggests that voters generally look to the past and vote retrospectively. Scholars with this predisposition include Anthony Downs, V. O. Key, Jr., Philip Converse, Angus Campbell, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. They contend that most voters are not well organized intellectually and that they are often incompletely informed of government and party policies. Therefore, they vote not for policies, but to show approval or disapproval of what has occurred.”

M. Khatun, personal communication, October 18, 2017.

S. Khatun, personal communication, October 18, 2017.


The Assam Tribune (March 7, 2017) *Around 138 cases of crime against women registered every month in Dhubri district.*

The Assam Tribune (March 7, 2017) *Around 138 cases of crime against women registered every month in Dhubri district.*

A. Begum, personal communication, October 29, 2017.


