

# Empowerment of Muslim Women in Char Areas: A Study of the Morigaon District of Assam

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## Abstract:

This study embarks on an in-depth exploration of the socio-political and economic dimensions of women's empowerment in the char areas of the Morigaon district in Assam, a region marked by its unique geographical and demographic characteristics. Despite accounting for nearly half of the nation's population, women in India, particularly those in the under-researched char areas, grapple with low literacy rates and limited access to educational resources, starkly contrasting with the national growth figures. This research aims to dissect the multifaceted layers of empowerment, or the lack thereof, among Muslim women in these regions, scrutinizing their socio-economic status, political awareness, and the systemic obstacles impeding their holistic development. Leveraging both primary and secondary data, and employing empirical, descriptive, and analytical methods, the study seeks to unveil the nuances of empowerment and the factors contributing to the continued backwardness of the char areas, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the life and challenges faced by the women residing in these isolated riverine islands of the Brahmaputra.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Char areas, Socio-economic status, Muslim women, Literacy rate.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION:

The concept of empowerment flows from power. Julian Rappaport, an American psychologist introduced the concept of empowerment into social work and social psychiatry. Rappaport viewed empowerment as a process- the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives (Rappaport, 1981). For Robert Adams empowerment is the capacity of individuals, groups or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process.

The word empowerment has also been used to refer a process. As a process it implies obtaining basic opportunities for marginalized people, either directly by non-marginalized others who share their own resources and experiences with the marginalized people. It also includes encouraging and developing the skills of the marginalized people for self-sufficiency. Thus, empowerment means the expansion of assets and capabilities of the poor people to participate in, negotiate with, control and hold accountable the institution that affect their lives. It particularly includes control over resources and ideology.

Women's empowerment is being defined in numerous ways. Basically it means accommodating women's perspectives in different issues relating to life and raising the status of women through education, awareness, literacy, and training (Kabeer, 2005)) Women's empowerment equips and allows women to make life-determining decisions. Thus, they may have the opportunity to re-define gender roles or other such roles, which allow them more freedom to pursue desired goals. Women empowerment has been understood as the process by which the powerless women gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. So far as women empowerment is concerned, it has different dimensions - economic, social, political, and psychological. Economic empowerment involves increasing the economic independence of women and their ability to make decisions about their financial resources. Social empowerment involves improving the status of women in society and addressing gender-based discrimination. Political empowerment involves increasing women's participation in political processes and decision-making. Psychological empowerment involves increasing women's self-confidence, self-esteem etc. participate in development activities.

### **1.2 CHAR AREA: AN INTRODUCTION:**

The mighty Brahmaputra River in its journey through the middle of Assam for a length of 800 km, has led to formation of large number of wastelands. In Assamese language these wastelands are called char/chaporis. However, there are differences between Char and Chaporis. While 'Char' means a small isle surrounded by water in a river, 'Chapari' means an area of sandy land in the bank of a river and attached to the main land. The Government of Assam defines the char areas as sandy land areas extended from Sadiya to Dhubri within the river Brahmaputra or surrounded by water of river Brahmaputra where people can live and cultivate. It also includes areas on either side of the river Brahmaputra extended up to embankment which are recurrently affected by floods and where people live and cultivate the land (Chakrabarty, 2009).

Chars are formed during floods with deposits of silts from year to year (Barua, 2015). The Chars are composed of both bed load and suspended load and are generally triangular in shape. During floods the Chars get submerged. Sometimes a Char may be completely wiped away by erosions. It is important here to know some facts about the river Brahmaputra as mentioned by Muzharul Islam Akond in his research work "Productivity and technical efficiency- an empirical analysis.

"During its journey through the plains of Assam, the river has a mean gradient of only about 1.5 m per km. Between Pasighat and Dibrugarh the bed slope of the river is 0.62 m per km, between Dibrugarh and Nimati ghat (near Jorhat) 0.17 m per km, Nimati ghat and Guwahati 0.13 m per km, and between Guwahati and Dhubri 0.094 m per km. Flowing in such a flat terrain, the river losses the velocity attained in the mountains, and consequently its capacity to carry silt. (Dutta, A. K.; 2001)".

It is basically due to the abovementioned geographical features of the river, it creates Char/Chaporis in its bed. However, in rainy season, the sediment transport capacity of the river Brahmaputra increases and during this period the river changes its position. During this period, generally the Char/Chaporis are submerged by the river water and sometimes they face erosion- due to which location and size of the Chars gets changed and sometimes some Chars are completely wiped out. Thus, Chars are unstable and can disappear overnight due to massive erosion by the turbulent river- particularly in rainy season. The erosion and deposition process triggers migration of people living in char areas.

**1.2 A) HISTORY OF CHAR AREAS:**

Presently, the Char areas of upper Assam are mainly inhabited by tribal people while the Char areas of the middle and the lower Assam especially the Char-Chaparis of Nowgaon, Morigaon, Darrang, Kamrup, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Dhubri districts are predominantly inhabited by Bengali Muslims (Akond). The Muslim char dwellers are unflatteringly called as *Charuas*. On account of their religion, they are a minority community in Assam. As the Muslim char dwellers migrant, the mainstream Assamese society found it difficult to accommodate them in the fold of Assamese society. The apprehension of growing Muslim presence in Brahmaputra valley has been another factor. However, many of the *Charuas* have taken to identify themselves as *Na-Asamiya* (the New Assamese), but it remains an open question whether adoption of a new identity has succeeded in abating the hostility they face from the everyday chauvinism (Bhaumik 2011).

Moreover, the geographical location of the char areas further kept it aloof. Located at the margin of the margin, facing huge problems like flood and erosion in every year and after all government apathy towards the chars have resulted a lackluster record of human development in char areas.

**1.2 B) CHARA REAS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME TO WELFARE OF MINORITIES DEVELOPMENT MINISTRY:**

‘The Assam State Char Areas Development Authority’. Thereafter, the Authority was redesignated as a full-fledged Government Directorate during 1996. However, following the patterns of alluvium and diluvium in the river Brahmaputra, the next survey (2003-04) showed that Dhubri district had the highest number of char villages and char population followed by Jorhat and Barpeta. Cultivable land as percentage of total land has declined from 70 per cent to 67.13 per cent during 1992-93 to 2002-03 and there has also been a simultaneous decline in the per capita availability of cultivable land. It is also observed that during the period of the two surveys, the population residing below the official poverty line increased substantially from 48.89 per cent to 67.89 per cent.

**The table-1.1 shows population, land occupation and poverty in Floating Char Villages, 1992-2004.**

Year	Nos of Char Villages	Total population	Total land occupied in hectors	% of BPL population
1992-93	2089	1600244	239, 000	48.90
2003-04	2251	24,90,397	360, 927	67.90
% increase	7.75	55.62	51.02	+19.00

Source: Directorate of Char Areas Development, Govt. of Assam ‘Socio-Economic Survey Report’, 1992-93 and 2003-04, & IMAGE: Research Journal, v01.ii, Sivasagar, Nazira (2013), ISSN 2347-534xPp.80-82

In *Char* areas literacy rate is as lower as 19.31% in 2003-04 against the state’s average of 63.25 in 2001. In a char called Uttar Ghudhuni in Barpeta district of Assam, as per 2011 census data, the female literacy rate is as low as 6 percent.

There has been no socio-economic survey of the char areas for nearly two decades. This survey revealed (table-1.2) literacy in the chars did not improve much from the 1992-93 scenario.

Name of District	No of Chars	Literacy rate 1992- 93	Literacy rate 2002- 03
Goalpara	187	8.38	13.6

Barpeta	351	12.90	17.63
Kamrup	148	16.85	15.16
Nalbari	58	7.90	16.24
Bongaigaon	150	12.85	12.46
Dhubri	313	19.06	14.60
Morigaon	41	8.02	18.50
Nagaon	29	9.44	17.59
Dhemaji	95	14.44	15.69
Lakhimpur	182	14.01	18.50
Sonitpur	118	12.63	16.93
Tinsukia	86	14.20	14.00
Jorhat	210	31.90	60.55
Darrang	121	10.12	12.34

**Table-1.2**

(Source: Socio-Economic Survey Report, Directorate of Char Areas Development, 1992-93 and 2002-03).

As per the 2002-03 survey, there are 1,852 Lower Primary schools, 574 Middle schools, 218 High schools, eight Higher Secondary schools and 18 Colleges cater to the educational needs of the char dwellers. This, for a population of 25 lakhs, means less than one lower primary school for 1,000 people and worse in the case of higher education. All these shows the char dwellers are excluded from the developmental process of the mainstream Assam. The exclusion is mainly due to the tag of illegal immigrants that was labelled in them. Mr. Gorky Chakraborty explains it Their attire, traits, behaviour, language and religion on one hand and the lack of knowledge on the part of the people of the mainland about the chars. Due to which, they have a tendency to abandon them as illegal immigrants, without displaying the courage to trace the root cause of their migration from the char areas. This not only creates doubt, suspicion and dispute among the population groups, but also generates a public opinion which becomes unfavourable for inclusion of the char dwellers into the mainstream. Any additional public expenditure gets highlighted as feeding the Bangladeshi’s at the cost of depriving the Indian nationals” (Chakraborty, 2012, p. 23).

Multi-dimensional poverty index (MPI) for the Char areas (18.57) has been recorded to be higher than state’s average of 12.49 in 2013. The table-1.3 shows it-

Areas/ Region	Multidimensionality poor index	Head count Index of Vulnerable	Multi dimensional poverty index(MPI)
Char villages	44.5	17.6	18.57
Assam	30.10	16.54	12.49

Monoj Goswami’s work “Char Settlers of Assam: A Demographic Study” so as to not only make any reader aware about these areas but also to contextualize the issues concerning the char areas. The historical experience of being outsiders, of belonging to a different religious and linguistic group, has to be kept in mind while analysing the social life of present-day Muslim char dwellers.

Balram Kumar and Debarshi Das in their article “Livelihood of the Char Dwellers of Western Assam” (Indian journal of Human Development, vol-13, Issue-1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703019839808>)

They observed that high amount of loss of land due to erosion. The research also found that 91 per cent households did not have access to clean water.

The growth of population is high and so is the density. The percentage of people living below the official poverty line rose from 48.89 per cent to 67.89 per cent in chars. In contrast, in Assam as a whole, the poverty rate was 36.09 per cent in 2002 (Chakraborty, 2012, p. 23). However, while analysing the social life of present-day Muslim char dwellers, their historical experience of being outsiders, of belonging to a different religious and linguistic group, has to be kept in mind.

### 1.3 MORIGAON DISTRICT : AT A GLANCE

Morigaon district falls in the middle Assam region. It became a full-fledged district on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1989, when it was cut from Nagaon District. Total area of Morigaon is 1,551 km<sup>2</sup>- which accounts for about 1.85% of the state’s total area. As per 2011 census, Morigaon has a population of 9,57,423 peoples- 3.07% of Assam’s total population. Urban population of Morigaon district is 73,298 while rural population is 8,84,125. The district has a population density of 617.3 inhabitants per square kilometer. There about 598 villages in Morigaon district.

The greater part of the district is an alluvial plain, crisscrossed with numerous rivers and water ways and dotted with many beels and marshes. The river in its bed has created many chars out of which 40 are semi-permanent.

There are 5 revenue circles in Morigaon district. These are-

a) Morigaon, b) Mayong, c) Mikirbheta, d) Laharighat, and e) Bhuragaon

While Mayong is the largest revenue circle in Morigaon district covering area of 503.23 km<sup>2</sup>, Mikirbheta is the smallest revenue circle in Morigaon district covering area of 186.68 km<sup>2</sup>. Laharighat is the most populous whereas Bhuragaon is the least populous revenue circle of the Morigaon district.

Morigaon revenue circle has 162 Revenue villages. Mayong revenue circle has 177 Revenue villages, out of which 7 Nos of villages are eroded fully While 9 Nos of villages are eroded partially. Bhuragaon Revenue Circle has total 122 Revenue villages- out of which 58 Nos are eroded fully and 12 Nos are eroded Partially. Laharighat Revenue Circle has total 103 Revenue villages out of which 29 Nos villages are eroded fully and 9 Nos are eroded partially (<https://morigaon.gov.in>). Out of these government records it is clear that total 94 numbers of villages are eroded fully while 30 numbers of revenue villages are eroded partially.

There are 7 Development Blocks in the District. These are-

i) Bhurbandha , ii) Kospili, iii) Mayong, iv) Moirabari, v) Laharighat, vi) Dolanghat (Part), vii) Batradoba (Part).

#### 1.3 A) Char areas of the Morigaon District:

Morigaon District in the South-central Assam has the dubious distinction of most erosion affected reverine areas of the State. The Brahmaputra up to the end of the century has eroded 10256.93 hectares of land in three revenue circles of the district- namely Bhuragaon, Laharighat and Mayong (Circle office of the District Revenue Department, Morigaon, 2001). The Chars in Marigaon district are scattered around Bhuragaon and Laharighat circles. Name of some chars are as under-

Gariamari, Sunarigaon, Sitalmari, Dhekermari, Neetmari, Jhaogar, Kahitoli, Borigaon, Sialmari, Harangtoli, Rowmari, Dhumkara

Citolmari Char, Bojakaiti Char, Ulobari Char, Mothertuli Char, Golakata Char, Holmari Char, Joittamari Char, Harangtoli Char, Mugurkhula Char, Mitmari Char, Rowmari Char, Pambori Char, Ranrai chapri Char, Dumkura Char, Senimari Char, Majuli Char, 1 No Goarimari Char, Matherkuri Char, Lewaramukh Char, Bajakati Char, Goairamari Char, Dekharmari Char, Sonarigaon Char, Holmari Char, Chutiagaon Char, Jotiamari Char, Nobo kochari Char, Humu Char, Lohori Char, Bhuragaon Char, Tengatuli Char, Makharigila Char, Kharkata pathar Char, Kharkata bori Char, Kharkata gaon Char, Sandha khaity kochari gaon, Rupahi Char, Boralimari bill Char, Haibar Pathar Char, Haibargaon Char, Mirikamari Char, Goriagaon Char, Guribil Char, Barunguri Char, Sisumari Char, Sutirpar Durabandhi Chapari, Nizsaharia Chapar, Tollocogaon Chapari, Bihubari Colony, Bikubari colony char, Lengaribori Chapari, Kalair char, Kharikata Char, Merbil Char, Azarguri char, Solmari Char, Baruating Char, Dighaliati Chapari, Pabakati Chapari, Bhuragaon Chapari, Amlakhuti Char, Ozagaon Chapari, Jauhughar Char 1 No Barkur Chapari, 2 No Barkur Chapari, Sewagia Pather Chapari, Bihubar Chapari, Tulsibori Chapari, Botabori Char, Bahakajuri Char, Barbori Char, gagalmari Char, Palkariguri Char, 1 No gagalmari Char, 2 No gagalmari Char, Marorhabi Char, Falihamari Char, Pabakati Char, Sandhallhaty Char

#### 1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM :

The geographical spread of Char is all over 14 districts of Assam en route the journey of the river Brahmaputra. As per the Socio-economic survey report of 1992-93, there were altogether 2089 Chars with Barpeta district having the highest number of Chars (351). According to this report Morigaon district had 40 numbers of Chars- which constitute 2% of Char areas of Assam. However, as per the report prepared in 2003-04, by the Directorate of Char Areas Development, there were altogether 2251 char villages in all these 14 districts with a total population of 24,90,097. Dhubri district has the highest number of Chars as per the 2003-04 survey. It shows the geographical instability of Char areas. However, according to 2003-04 report, Morigaon district had 40 numbers of Chars and constantly had 2% of total Char areas of Assam.

The Char areas of Assam has been far backward than the mainland Assam in key different sectors.

- Literacy rate of Assam in 1991 was 52.89% and in 2001 it was 63.30% while in char areas it was just 15.45% and 19.31% respectively. In this decade literacy rate of Assam increased by nearly 10 percentage points, while in char areas it increased less than 4 percentage points.
- Between the 1992-93 and 2002-03 survey, the area of the char land increased marginally by 1.37% - whereas population increased by 56%. During this period decadal growth rate of population of Assam was only 18.85%. It means growth rate of population is 37% more in Char areas.
- In char areas total number of LP Schools in 2002-03 was only 1852 and in terms of percapita availability of LP schools, this figure comes to only 0.07%. (Nayak & Panda)
- The density of population in char areas was more than double of the state as a whole. In Char areas, the density of population in 2002-03 was 690 per sq.km. while only 340 per sq.km for the state as a whole.
- The char areas inhabit 9.37% of total population of the state while they possess only 4% of Assam's agricultural land (Chakrabarty, 2009).

Thus, the above discussion reveals that Char areas are ridden with problems like illiteracy, poverty and population explosion. In the midst of geographical instability, the Char Chapori dwellers are in the midst of vicious cycle of poverty and population explosion. In the Char area, women are often engaged in agricultural activities, such as paddy cultivation, fishing, and livestock rearing. However, they face challenges such as lack of access to credit, market information, and technical know-how. To address these challenges, there is a need to provide women with training and education on financial literacy, business management, and entrepreneurship. This can be done through the establishment of self-help groups, microfinance institutions, and other forms of support.

In the Char area, women often face restrictions on their mobility, access to education, and participation in decision-making processes. To address these issues, there is a need to promote gender equality through awareness-raising campaigns, education, and advocacy. This can be done through partnerships with civil society organizations, community-based organizations, and religious leaders.

### 1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

- To understand the socio-economic status of Muslim women in char areas.
- To know about political awareness of the Muslim women in char areas.
- To find out the hindrances they face in their all-round development.

### 1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY :

The study will cover the char areas of the Morigaon district of Assam. Presently, there are 40 numbers of Char in the district. This scope of the study will encompass the socio-political and economic aspects of life of women in char areas to understand their level of empowerment. This study will also search the factors responsible for backwardness of the char areas.

### 1.7 LITERATURE REVIEW :

Prafulla Hazarika in his article '*Development Dimension of Char areas in Assam and its Constraints*' published in "International Journal of Research in Commerce, IT & Management", (2021) tried to highlight the development constraints of these *Chars* caused by excessive growth of population, less education etc.

'SDG 4 and the Education of Char Women in Assam' has been an important article on education of women in Char areas of Dhubri, Barpeta, Darrang, Marigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of Assam. As a part of a media fellowship programme under the aegis of National Foundation for India, New Delhi, the study has been made on education of women in char areas of the above-mentioned districts of Assam ([SDG 4 And The Education Of Char Women In Assam| Countercurrents](#)).

Gorky Chakraborty's 'The Demographic Question in the Char Areas of Assam'- a book review of Monoj Goswami's work 'Char Settlers of Assam: A Demographic Study' (OKDISCD Social Change and Development Vol. XI No.2, 2014.) has been a fact-finding work. Here the author delved deep into the colonial history to find out the cause of migration to the Char areas of Assam. The author mentioned that the lack of technical details such as fertility, mortality, morbidity etc. of the char population, lack of proper data etc. adds fuel to the perception that the char dwellers indulge in rampant polygamy and

uncontrolled breeding. Some others show the chars only as the ‘abode of the illegal immigrants’(Chakraborty’, 2014).

“*Poverty, Literacy and Muslim Society with Special Reference to Assam*” by Dr. Md. Johirul Hoque (Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR), Volume 5, Issue 11, November 2018, [www.jetir.org](http://www.jetir.org)) has been a very important work on multidimensional poverty and illiteracy faced by the Muslim Community- particularly the Char dwellers of Assam. The author found that Monthly per capita expenditure of Muslims is much lower than the national average. Majority of Muslim families in rural and char areas do not receive food grain. One out of every three Muslim family in rural areas survives on less than about Rupees 400/- (US \$6) per month. Most of children between 0-10 years of age group are suffering from malnutrition (anemia) due to poverty. 25% Muslim children belonging to 6-14 years age groups either drop out or never attend school in their locality. Dropout rates is higher at primary, middle and higher secondary levels specially in Char-dwellers (Hoque, November 2018).

### 1.8 PROPOSED METHODOLOGY :

Empirical, descriptive and analytical methods will be used for the study. Primary data will be collected from the local residents- particularly women of different chars of the Morigaon district. Primary data will be collected through structured questionnaire and interview schedule. The prominent members of the area will be interviewed. The secondary data will be collected from various books, journals, newspaper etc. Internet service will be used to get various online data.

Conclusion : In conclusion, the empowerment of Muslim women in the Char area of Morigaon district of Assam requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the multiple dimensions of empowerment. This approach should involve partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, and religious leaders. By empowering women, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society that benefits all members of the community.

Conclusion : In conclusion, the empowerment of Muslim women in the Char area of Morigaon district of Assam requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the multiple dimensions of empowerment. This approach should involve partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, and religious leaders. By empowering women, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society that benefits all members of the community.

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