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MUSLIM WOMEN IN RIVER ISLANDS ALONG THE BRAHMAPUTRA IN ASSAM: A STUDY ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC, EDUCATIONAL AND EMPOWERMENT DISPARITIES

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Abstract:

Many parts of rural Assam lack modern development in education, health care, and other basic services. Remote communities in inaccessible islands along the Brahmaputra river, known as Char/Sapori, face significant challenges. These areas are prone to frequent floods, causing distress to the inhabitants. Limited access to higher education contributes to their underdevelopment. A lack of awareness, absence of higher education and empowerment opportunities and traditional gender roles hinder progress, particularly for women in these communities. Women often face suppression in traditionally patriarchal and religiously conservative societies. The study is centered around the impact of educational attainment on the social and health well-being of Muslim women residing along the Brahmaputra river in Assam's Sonitpur district. A quantitative research was carried out, involving a sample of 100 women aged between 18 and 60 years, selected through purposive sampling. The collected data was then analyzed using SPSS and the simple percentile method.

Keywords: Muslim women, River island (char), Educational level, Social status, Health status, Empowerment

“O women: Lovely women:

Nature made thee to Temper man:

We had been beasts without you.”

Thomas Otway

I. Introduction:

The term "status" refers to the level of prestige or respect women experience in various facets of life (Raj, 2004). Women are crucial for development initiatives and shaping younger generations, comprising nearly half of the population. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru highlighted how women's status reflects a country's character. Evaluating women's status in society involves factors like income, employment, education, health, decision making power inside-outside home and their contributions to the community (Vatta, 2003). Despite being essential members, women have often

faced marginalization as the 'second sex,' 'lesser sex,' or 'weaker sex.' (Siddiqi and Ranganatha, 2001). Historically, cultural beliefs have maintained women's lower social status compared to men. Girls face discrimination from birth, including issues like female foeticide and infanticide, higher mortality rates, lower life expectancy, reduce literacy rate, increased morbidity, limited employment opportunity, and limited imbalanced sex ratios (Srinivas and Prasad, 2003). Women's empowerment involves education, awareness, literacy programs, and skills training to help women assert control over their lives and overcome societal challenges.

Women make up 48.46% of the country's total population, totaling 586.46 million individuals. While there has been some improvement in the sex ratio, with 943 females for every 1,000 males in 2011, the numbers are still below an ideal level. The neglect of women's potential in society is a significant contributor to the societal lag. Many illiterate women, especially those in rural areas, are not aware of their rights and therefore do not advocate for them within their families and communities. Lack of education and training hinders these women from participating fully in developmental processes. Educating women has a ripple effect, benefiting entire families, reducing poverty, and bridging gender disparities (Kalbaugh, 1991).

According to the **2011 Census of India**, Assam is the most populous state in the North-Eastern region with a total population of 31,205,576. Hindus make up 61.47% of the population, Muslims 34.22%, Christians 3.74%, and the remaining 0.58% comprises Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and other religious groups or those who didn't specify their religion. Assam is home to the fifth-largest Muslim population in India, after Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, and Maharashtra. Muslims are the second largest and fastest-growing community in Assam. The "Bengali Muslim" who are either migrants or descendants of migrants from East Bengal, (now called Bangladesh) in Assam has shown a 15-17% growth from 2001-2011, specially in bordering districts and riverine areas of the Brahmaputra river of Assam over the past decade. The Assam Minority Development *Board (2020)* estimates there are 14 million (1.4 crore) Muslims in the state, with more than 10 million being of Bengali origin, and rest are Indian origin indigenous Assamese Muslims. Most of the Bengali origin Muslim resides in the riverine areas known locally as char/saporis along the Brahmaputra river in Assam. This community is distinguished by being more underdeveloped compared to their counterparts from the mainland Muslim community in the state.

Women from this community face severe challenges, not solely due to poverty. They are significantly impacted, with factors like community rigidity, patriarchy, and exclusion from secular education contributing to their situation. The emphasis on purdah system as a religious practice, limited educational opportunities beyond religious studies, and societal fears of losing Islamic identity are notable challenges. These barriers lead to higher levels of illiteracy and limited access to opportunities, exacerbating the community's socio-economic struggles. The present study is centered

around the impact of educational attainment on the social and health well-being. The primary aim is to analyze the socio-economic status of riverine Muslim women and devise strategies to tackle the multifaceted challenges they face through the following objectives-

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the socio-demographic & economic characteristics of Muslim women residing in char/sapori regions along the Brahmaputra.
2. To understanding the significance of acquiring education that impacts the overall status of Muslims in the river islands of the Brahmaputra in Assam is essential.
3. To assess obstacles for women in char areas that impede their social status and suggest strategies to improve the situation for Muslim women.

II. Background of the Study Area

1. The Char/ Saporis:

The Brahmaputra River, affecting Assam's flood-prone plains, displays characteristics leading to the erosion of its islands, known as chars or chaporis. The region covers about 724 km with 3,608 sq km of char/chapori areas, making up 4.6% of the state's total area. This area includes 2,251 villages spread across 23 sub-divisions in 14 districts. Factors such as geological fragility, seismic activity, and annual flooding contribute to the rapid erosion of the saporis, causing frequent displacement for the riverine population. In the upper Brahmaputra region, char/chapori areas are less dense but relatively permanent. Moving to middle Assam districts char areas are more widespread, including permanent, semi-permanent, and temporary islands. Lower Assam districts, have a high density of chars, primarily semi-permanent and temporary in nature (**Goswami and Hazarika, 2016**).

2. The Muslim Community in Riverine Areas:

Within the Brahmaputra river islands are some of Assam's most underdeveloped regions. Many islands lack crucial infrastructure and services, like healthcare, education, electricity, roads, safe water, and sanitation. These communities face social marginalization, especially women and children. The residents there have not benefited from progress, leading to marginalization, poverty, illiteracy, and vulnerability. Families rely on agricultural work to survive, often living in simple bamboo huts on small, impermanent plots of land affected by the river. The region is prone to frequent flooding, especially in the summer, causing significant harm to the population and leaving them feeling helpless **Goswami & Hazarika, (2016)**. In this patriarchal society with strong religious beliefs, women seldom assert their rights and status. In minority dominance societies in Sonitpur to Dhubri district, women experience male dominance, restricted decision-making power, and limited reproductive rights. Despite their significant contributions to agriculture, women lack recognition and autonomy in determining the number of children they want to have, often resulting in unwanted

multiple pregnancies.

3. Educational Status:

Education significantly influences demographic behavior, including fertility, mortality, morbidity, and malnutrition, leading to societal change. Higher literacy and educational standards are essential for driving social development. The importance of empowering women economically is underscored by high illiteracy rates and economic challenges. Scholars Jean Drese and Amartya Sen highlight education and health as crucial for enhancing personal freedom, citing various factors such as intrinsic importance, instrumental and process roles, empowerment, and distributive roles. Literacy can significantly expand individuals' income-generating opportunities and improve quality of life.

Educational opportunities are limited in areas like char/sapori, with a low literacy rate of 19.31%, much lower than state and national averages of 72% and 74.37%, respectively. In present research areas, there are two school clusters: totaling 29 schools (20 in Gabharu block and 9 in Dhekiajuli of Sonitpur district). The cluster includes both private and government schools. Government schools in both blocks were established between 1994 and 2006, providing education up to fifth grade. Lack of high schools nearby led to children dropping out after the fifth grade, particularly girls. This situation often results in early marriages among Muslim communities in isolated char/sapori areas, leading to higher rates of maternal and infant mortality. The recent All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2017-18 revealed that only 5% of Muslims are participating in higher education in India. In Assam, a state with a significant Muslim population, Muslims make up 13% of higher education enrollment. However, this is lower than the enrollment rates for Scheduled Castes (SC) at 19.4% and Scheduled Tribes (ST) at 20.8% in the state.

4. Muslim Women, Domestic Violence & Mental Illness:

Despite the fact that women in the Islamic religion are granted the right to a dignified life, education, ownership and management of property, marriage, child care, inheritance, work, and social esteem, severe disparities persist in certain communities. Women in rural areas are experiencing domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and are often perceived as the weaker sex without equal rights in various aspects. The topic of women's rights and responsibilities is complex and controversial, especially in relation to the challenges faced by Muslim women. They lack legal protection against abuse, particularly from their spouses, and social customs often limit their rights, even in regions with laws aimed at their protection, **Das & Singh (2020)**.

In char/saporis, documented cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence affecting Muslim women include wife beating, verbal abuse, and blaming women for having same-sex children. This mistreatment often leads to women being blamed and mistreated by their spouses

and their families, sometimes resulting in divorce or threats of polygamy. Victims of this abuse seldom come forward to report their experiences or seek assistance. This is primarily because of lack of exposure to legal rights and supports from the community. They successfully have no rights, or recourse, to protect themselves physically, sexually, financially, or otherwise from abuse, especially by husbands. Even where there are laws to protect women in India, local patriarchal traditions often radically curtail their rights.

5. Muslim Women and Reproductive Health:

Within the current scope of research, it is common to observe violations of women's reproductive health and rights within their respective societies. Young girls are typically married off soon after their first period, leading to early motherhood with multiple children by the age of 18. This can result in health complications like anemia and other diseases due to inadequate physical readiness for motherhood. Furthermore, they are not granted the freedom to exercise full control over their bodily autonomy. The lack of decision-making power in reproductive matters and poor spacing between pregnancies further highlights the significant concerns surrounding women's sexual and reproductive rights. Women also encounter challenges related to gender inequality, poverty, economic dependence, physical health, and limited reproductive choices. Many Muslim women face barriers in accessing Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) services due to limited knowledge and access and negative attitudes as well. Obstacles to contraception use among this group include a lack of basic reproductive knowledge, lack of interest on adoption of family planning methods, misunderstandings about contraception, misconceptions on uses of contraceptives in right ways. Negative perceptions towards family planning, particularly regarding limiting children but not child spacing, are often influenced by religious beliefs. Religious, cultural beliefs, and family dynamics frequently hinder contraception use and access to SRH services and information (Alomair et al, 2020).

6. Muslim Women as the Invisible Work Force:

Women and girls in the workforce, both at home and in agriculture, play crucial roles that are often undervalued. They are actively engaged in various agricultural activities at every stage, as highlighted in Sharma's (1999) study on women's work in the agricultural sector in Kamrup district, Assam. Since a very young age, women in rural areas have been actively involved in various aspects of agricultural production, including fieldwork, seed processing, transportation to rice mills, cattle rearing, and household chores. However, a concerning issue arises as there is a noticeable wage disparity between male and female workers, even when they put in the same amount of work hours. According to the National Commission of Women's report on the status of Muslim women as documented by Hameed (2000), there is a significant disparity in the levels of unemployment and earning potential between Muslims and other groups. This unfortunate situation among Muslims is

frequently attributed to their employment trends and substandard working environments.

Significance of the Study:

This region remains unexplored and lacks in-depth research on topics such as womanhood, education, reproductive health, and rights. Conducting a comprehensive study can uncover valuable insights for interventions and potentially lead to further investigations on gender, society, and development within religious minority groups in char/sapori areas. The findings could inform the creation of gender-specific policies for marginalized women and strategies for population control tailored to reach isolated char community members. This study has the potential to set a precedent for future research in the area.

Delimitations of the Study:

The study took place in Sonitpur district, Assam, with a sample size of 100 individuals from 13 districts where the Muslim community resides in char/sapori areas. It is suggested that future studies by other researchers focus on gender issues.

III. Research Methodology:

The present study was conducted among Muslim women living in the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra in the Sonitpur district of Assam. A sample group of 100 women aged 18-60 from these areas was purposefully selected for the study. An interview guide was crafted to collect primary data through in-depth interviews. Information about the study area was also gathered from relevant developmental blocks like primary health centers, social welfare departments, and local governance bodies. Data was collected from 20 char villages in the Bihaguri and Dhekiajuli developmental blocks in the district. The gathered data was analyzed using SPSS, and simple percentile calculations were used to assess the situation of Muslim women in char/Sapori regions based on the aforementioned objectives.

IV. Analysis and Interpretation of Data:

Upon completion of the frequency and percentage calculations, the data was systematically organized, categorized, and presented in the subsequent tables delineated by the three specified objectives mentioned above-

Objective 1: Socio-demographic & Economic Status of Women in River Islands of the Brahmaputra-

Table-1 provides a concise overview of the socio-demographic & economic characteristics of 100 selected Muslim women:

Particulars	Total Respondents in number (N=100)	Percentage
1. Marital Status- Married	91	91
Widow	7	7
Divorced	2	2

2. Religion-	Hindu	0	0
	Muslim	100	100
	Christian	0	0
	Others	0	0
3. Type of Family-	Nuclear	67	67
	Joint	33	33
4. No. of Family Members-	Upto 4	38	38
	5-6	46	46
	7 and above	16	16
5. No. of Children-	0-2	11	11
	3-4	73	73
	5-6	16	16
6. Monthly Family Income-	Upto 5,000/-	9	9
	5,000-10,000/-	52	52
	10,000-15,000/-	27	27
	Above 15,000/-	12	12

Table 1 presents data on marital status, indicating that 91 percent of women were married while only 2 percent were divorced. It was found that all participants practiced Islam in the research areas. The majority, or 67 percent, preferred a nuclear family structure. In terms of family size, approximately 46 percent of respondents reported having 5-6 family members, while 16 percent stated they had more than 7 members in their family. About 73 percent of families have up to 4 children, whereas only 11 percent reported having a maximum of two children. Concerning monthly family income, 52 percent of respondents stated that their income falls within the 5-10 thousand per month category, while 27 percent mentioned their income reaching up to 15 thousand per month, and 9 percent reported earning a maximum of 5 thousand per month.

Objective 2: Significance of acquiring education that impacts the overall status of Muslim women-

Table- 2 presents the specifics of educational attainment of the respondents.

Particulars	Total Respondents in numbers (N=100)	Percentage	
1. School Educational-	No formal education	36	36
	Primary	24	24
	Up to 5 th standard	20	20
	Up to 8 th standard	11	11
	Up to Matric	7	7
	Up to 12 th standard	2	2
	Up to graduation	0	0
2. Religious Education-	Yes	86	86
	No	14	14
3. Reason for drop-out-	Poverty	43	43

Ignorance of parents	26	26
Non availability of schools	12	12
Preference to Male child education	19	19

Table 2 presents compelling evidence showcasing the lower educational attainment of Muslim women in the char/sapori regions. A significant portion of respondents, around 36%, indicated that they had not received any formal education. Furthermore, 24% had education up to the primary level, 20% up to the fifth standard, 11% up to the 8th standard, and 7% up to the matric level. Merely 2% had progressed to the 12th standard, with no respondents having attained education at the graduate level or above. In contrast, 86% of women had received religious education in madrasas. The primary barriers reported for lack of education in char areas were poverty (43%) as the primary reason, followed by parental ignorance (26%). Additionally, 12% of respondents mentioned the absence of nearby school facilities as a cause for dropping out. Finally, 19% expressed that their parents prioritized sending their male siblings to school over their daughters.

Objective 3: Assess obstacles for women that impede the social status of to improve their present situation-

Table-3 displays information on obstacles faced by riverine women within the family and societal context.

Particulars	Total Respondents in numbers (N=100)	Percentage
1. Decision making power-		
Mainly you	3	3
Mainly your husband	84	84
Both you and your husband jointly	11	11
Other family members (in-laws)	2	2
2. Budget making power-		
You alone	1	1
Your husband alone	91	91
Both you and your husband jointly	8	8
3. Women movement outside the home-		
Always allowed to go alone	2	2
Sometimes allowed to go alone	8	8
Never allowed to go alone outside	90	90
4. Is Purdah system compulsory-		
Not compulsory	7	7
Always compulsory	76	76
Compulsory on some situations	17	17

Table 3 illustrates the level of authority held by the respondents in decision-making and family budget management among the entire group of 100 respondents. The data indicates that a

significant majority, more than three-fourth (84%), of the respondents never engage in major household decision-making. Only 11 percent of respondents indicated active involvement in all decision-making processes. Similarly, 91 percent of husbands make budget decisions unilaterally without involving their wives. A majority of respondents (90%) stated that they are not allowed to leave their house or village unaccompanied, as per strict family and societal norms. Only 8% mentioned being able to venture out alone to nearby areas like markets within their villages during the daytime. In terms of privacy, 76% of women reported being obligated to follow the purdah system when leaving their homes. Merely 7% mentioned having the freedom to relinquish purdah, while 17% stated that they only wear it on special occasions instead of all the time.

V. Summary of the Analysis:

An attempt was made to analyze the socio-economic, educational and empowerment disparities persist among Muslim women residing in river islands along the Brahmaputra in Assam. 20 most backward chars in terms of accessibility of Sonitpur district, Assam were selected to interview a total of 100 women aged between 18- 60 yrs. to elicit the required information. The main findings from the research are outlined and presented below.

Each participant in the study identifies themselves as adherents of the Islamic faith within the overarching classification. A majority of participants are from nuclear families, while close to half of them hail from larger families with five or more members. This phenomenon is particularly common among Muslims in Chars/Saporis, potentially linked to a disinclination towards employing family planning techniques. The data reveals that nearly seventy-five percent of respondents have up to four children. The issue of poverty looms large among Muslims residing in river islands, partly due to the presence of notably large families. Additionally, approximately half of the families report a monthly income ranging from 5 to 10 thousand. It is necessary to acknowledge that in today's era, it is extremely challenging to attain a high quality of life, encompassing essential amenities such as adequate formal education and nutritious meals, with a monthly income of approximately 10 thousand units.

An alarming discovery was made concerning the literacy levels of riverine Muslim women, where 36 percent were found to be illiterate. The inadequate educational attainment of Muslim women can be attributed to various factors including low economic status, restrictive attitudes of the community and parents, adherence to the 'purdah' tradition, prioritization of religious education over secular education, early marriages post-puberty, and assigning daughters to household duties. Discrepancies were observed among respondents regarding the education of girls in Muslim society, with 19 percent of parents focusing on educating boys for future family support. Limited availability of schools and educational resources in the research areas posed a significant barrier to accessing modern education for Muslim women.

Empowering women is a critical subject in the current context and a significant factor for driving social change related to gender and development. Empowerment of women can be viewed as a structured procedure through which women gain increased control over tangible and intellectual assets, allowing them to achieve greater autonomy in household decision-making and economic matters. Empowerment in the personal lives and household affairs of women stems from their ability to make decisions that influence their circumstances. Possible reasons for the low egalitarian attitudes of Muslims towards women's participation in household economic decision-making could be attributed to their disadvantaged economic conditions and limited educational attainment. Findings from recent research indicate a significant lack of recognition for women's involvement in major decision-making processes and family budgeting. Additionally, it has been observed that women are restricted in their mobility outside the household, often requiring accompaniment by a male family member or relative. Furthermore, they are not permitted to go outside without purdah. Based on the data provided, it is evident that Muslim women exhibit a lower capacity for decision-making compared to women from their mainland Muslim counterparts.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations:

Addressing the disadvantaged position of Muslim women in Indian society particularly in backward areas like riverine areas is a significant issue that requires urgent attention. It is imperative for the Government, Muslim leaders, and women activists within the Muslim community to collaboratively take affirmative steps towards enhancing the current standing of Muslim women. By elevating their status, not only will the community advance and modernize, but the nation as a whole will also experience progress and modernization. In light of the analysis provided, suggestions have been proposed to enhance the well-being of Muslim women in char areas.

1. In Assam, Northeastern India, the current research area faces severe floods and river bank erosion. Building elevated flood shelters on the 2,500 islands along the Brahmaputra river, which are home to three million people, could be a solution. These shelters could help address climate change impacts by providing livelihood opportunities and income generation. During dry seasons, they could serve as centres for women's skills development and training programs. It is imperative to engage skill development agencies to support the growth of women entrepreneurs. This will help them connect with local and online markets, expanding their reach globally.
2. Men's active involvement is crucial for effective family planning mobilization.
3. Starting marriage early increases the likelihood of pregnancy and higher fertility rates. To lower fertility levels, it is advisable to delay marriage and increase the number of unmarried women, as opposed to marrying young and promoting universal marriage for women.
4. In areas with low economic development, it is important for authorities and community

groups to improve financial inclusion for women by offering them financial services and access to loans. Empowering women with traditional skills and connecting them with markets can also create opportunities. In order for initiatives around family planning to succeed, it is crucial to involve and engage men in households.

5. Education is key in empowering individuals, especially young women, by helping them finish high school and pursue further studies. Governments should support students by covering transportation costs to schools and colleges to decrease dropout rates.
6. Collaborations between governments and civil society organizations are vital in promoting a zero-tolerance policy towards child marriages. Civil society groups, particularly those with community ties, can raise awareness and drive behavioral change within communities.
7. It is essential for members of the Muslim community, specifically women, to acknowledge and discuss the challenges they face, consider reasons and solutions for their socio-economic struggles, advocate for legal reforms, strive for increased political involvement, and work towards dismantling patriarchal systems within the community.

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