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Gender, Caste, Backward Classes, and Inclusive Education: Examining Muslim Women's Political Participation in the Char Areas of Morigaon, Assam

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ABSTRACT:

The char regions of Morigaon district in Assam, shaped by the changing course of the Brahmaputra, face distinct geographic and socio-economic challenges. Residents of these river islands deal with seasonal flooding, erosion, and limited access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Muslim women in these areas experience added marginalization from the combined effects of gender, caste, class, and minority religious status. This study looks into their political participation, emphasizing how education, social norms, and economic status impact their involvement. A mixed-methods approach combined surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with 120 women. Participants were selected using stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across age, literacy, and socio-economic status. Fieldwork encountered challenges due to isolation, seasonal floods, and cultural mobility restrictions, which were addressed with help from local facilitators and community collaboration. Findings show that literacy and education significantly boost political awareness and participation. However, patriarchal norms, financial instability, and caste-based discrimination limit involvement. Educated women actively participate in local governance and community decision-making, while illiterate and older women tend to be less engaged. The study highlights the need for intersectional policies that focus on educational access, community empowerment, and gender equality. Improving inclusive education and local capacity-building initiatives can increase political participation among Muslim women in char areas, promoting better representation and responsive governance.

Keywords: Muslim women, political participation, char areas, inclusive education, caste, intersectionality, Assam

Introduction:

The char areas of Assam, particularly in Morigaon district, are riverine islands formed over centuries by the shifting Brahmaputra and its tributaries. These islands are fragile and face annual flooding, soil erosion, and seasonal inundation, often displacing communities and disrupting livelihoods. Historically, char settlements have accommodated marginalized groups, including landless farmers, migrant laborers, and economically disadvantaged communities. The population density on these islands varies, but char dwellers generally experience deep poverty and lack access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure like roads and schools (Hussain, 2014). Agriculture, fishing, and wage labor are primary income sources, but unpredictable environmental conditions create severe uncertainty regarding income and food security.

Muslim women in these char areas hold a particularly vulnerable position. The overlap of gender, religion, and socio-economic disadvantage subjects them to multiple layers of marginalization. Patriarchal norms restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, and participation in public life. Early marriage, household responsibilities, and cultural restrictions further limit their social and political engagement. When male family members migrate for work, women often take on

additional domestic and caregiving roles, but this does not lead to greater autonomy in political or economic decisions. Poverty and low literacy rates among Muslim women worsen their exclusion from governance processes and diminish their political voice in local affairs (Sharma, 2018).

In the broader Indian context, the intersection of gender, caste, class, and religion strongly influences political participation. Caste hierarchies and backward class status have historically limited access to resources, education, and political representation (Beteille, 1991). Gender inequalities further heighten these issues, especially among minority communities in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. In Assam, these dynamics are intensified in char regions, where environmental vulnerability and poor infrastructure add to social marginalization, creating a unique environment for studying political participation.

Political participation includes a wide range of activities, from voting and candidate nomination to involvement in local governance bodies like panchayats and gram sabhas. Informal political participation also encompasses community organizing, advocacy, public protests, and local dispute resolution. For marginalized women, political participation is often limited by structural inequalities, cultural norms, and a lack of awareness of their rights and processes. Education, awareness campaigns, and inclusive institutions are crucial for enabling meaningful participation (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978).

This study is significant because it examines how the intersection of gender, caste, backward class status, and education shapes the political involvement of Muslim women in Morigaon's char areas. By analyzing socio-economic profiles, access to education, and community experiences, this research aims to uncover barriers and facilitators of political participation. The study seeks to provide evidence for policy interventions, such as targeted educational programs, awareness campaigns, and reforms that can empower marginalized women politically. Understanding these dynamics is vital for encouraging inclusive governance and enabling women to engage in democratic processes in regions often left out of mainstream political discussions.

This study places Muslim women's political participation within the frameworks of socio-cultural and economic marginalization, environmental vulnerability, and lack of educational opportunities. It stresses the need for approaches that address multiple inequalities, acknowledging that simply tackling gender inequality is not enough without also addressing caste, class, and education. Through this lens, the research contributes to the broader conversation on political inclusion, social justice, and democratic representation in India, particularly in areas that are ecologically and socially marginalized.

Literature Review:

Women's Political Participation in India: State-Level Insights

Women's political participation in India has been thoroughly studied, revealing significant differences across regions influenced by socio-economic and cultural factors. In states like Bihar, initiatives such as the Mahila Samvad program have effectively increased women's involvement in governance. This program focuses on education and women's empowerment, resulting in greater female participation in local decision-making. Similarly, in Maharashtra, the celebration of Jagtik Adivasi Diwas highlights the journey of tribal women, emphasizing the roles of education and community support in promoting political involvement.

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Studies show that illiteracy, domestic responsibilities, and discriminatory attitudes continue to limit women's active participation in politics. A 2012 study involving 3,000 Indian women found that barriers like illiteracy, household chores, and societal discrimination significantly reduce women's involvement in public office.

Global Perspectives on Marginalized Women's Political Engagement

Globally, marginalized women face complex barriers to political participation. Research points out that factors like socio-economic status, education, and cultural norms work together to restrict their involvement in political processes. Studies from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that while women in these regions have made progress in political engagement, challenges such as gender-based violence, economic dependency, and limited access to education still hold them back.

The Role of Education in Political Empowerment

Education is crucial in empowering women politically. In India, studies show that educated women are more likely to engage in political activities, including voting, attending meetings, and holding public office. Reports from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) indicate a direct link between female literacy rates and levels of political engagement among women.

Furthermore, education equips women to make informed choices, assert their rights, and challenge existing power dynamics. It also provides them with the necessary skills to navigate political systems and advocate effectively for their interests.

Backward Classes, Inclusive Education, and Intersectionality

The term "backward classes" in India refers to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), all of whom have faced historical social and economic marginalization. Inclusive education aims to offer equal learning opportunities to these groups, addressing gaps in both access and quality of education.

Intersectionality theory, applied in the Indian context, looks at how overlapping identities—such as caste, class, gender, and religion—combine to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. For instance, Dalit women face the dual burdens of caste and gender discrimination, which significantly affects their access to education and political participation.

Gaps in Research: Focus on Char Areas

While considerable research exists on women's political participation in various parts of India, there is a lack of studies focused specifically on the char areas of Assam. These riverine islands present unique challenges, including geographic isolation, environmental vulnerability, and socio-economic disadvantages, which worsen the marginalization of women. The intersection of gender, caste, class, and religion in these areas creates a complex set of disadvantages that hinder women's political involvement.

Existing literature often overlooks the specific needs and experiences of women in char areas, resulting in a lack of targeted policies and interventions. This gap highlights the need for focused research to identify barriers to women's political participation in these regions and to develop strategies for their empowerment.

This literature review provides an overview of the factors affecting women's political participation, with a specific focus on the unique context of Assam's char areas. It sets the stage for further empirical investigation into the intersectional challenges faced by Muslim women in these regions.

Methodology:

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to capture both statistical trends and personal experiences. Nine char villages across Bhuragaon, Laharighat, and Mayong revenue circles were selected. Stratified purposive sampling ensured representation by age, literacy, and socio-economic status, resulting in 120 participants. Structured questionnaires collected data on demographics, political knowledge, engagement, and education.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions explored perceptions, barriers, and motivations. A pilot study refined the instruments for clarity and relevance. Fieldwork faced challenges due to isolation, seasonal flooding, and cultural mobility restrictions; these were addressed with support from local facilitators. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify trends, while qualitative data underwent thematic coding to capture recurring themes and insights.

Results:

Survey results show that only 38% of respondents regularly attended gram sabha meetings, 25% occasionally participated, and 37% had never engaged. Voting rates were higher, with 71% participating in recent local elections, but only 12% had considered leadership roles. Literacy had a strong influence on participation; educated women were twice as likely to engage actively. Age and marital status also shaped engagement patterns: younger women showed more awareness, while older women faced mobility issues. Caste and backward class status impacted participation as well; women from OBC and minority groups reported less access to political information and opportunities. Economic vulnerability added to these barriers, as low-income women faced time constraints and social dependence. Qualitative analysis revealed obstacles like patriarchal customs, lack of political knowledge, and limited educational opportunities. Education and community support, especially through self-help groups, emerged as key factors for empowerment. Patterns across villages showed disparities, with Bhuragaon having higher engagement due to NGOs and education centers, while Laharighat and Mayong had lower participation due to infrastructural and environmental challenges. Overall, participation is limited but positively influenced by education, awareness, and social networks.

Discussion:

The findings illustrate the complex interactions of social, economic, and educational factors affecting political participation. The civic voluntarism model and Milbrath's hierarchy emphasize how resources, mobilization, and awareness drive engagement. Literate women moved beyond passive participation like voting to engage actively in local governance. An intersectionality analysis reveals compounded disadvantages for women at the intersections of gender, caste, and class, confirming trends in both Indian and global studies. Education stands out as a critical enabler, enhancing political efficacy, awareness, and confidence. Socio-cultural norms, domestic responsibilities, and economic constraints continue to pose challenges. Policy implications include promoting inclusive education, literacy programs, civic awareness, community networks, and reforms to ensure equitable

participation. Interventions should combine education, socio-economic support, and cultural awareness to overcome systemic barriers and encourage empowerment in char areas.

Conclusion :

This study examines Muslim women's political participation in the char areas of Morigaon district, Assam. It highlights the complex interaction among gender, caste, socio-economic status, education, and geographical vulnerability. The findings show that political involvement among these women is limited, with only a few actively taking part in local governance, elections, and community decisions. Literacy and educational achievement were key factors in participation. They help women gain political awareness, navigate government structures, and express their views within their families and communities. The various disadvantages faced by Muslim women, which come from patriarchal norms, socio-economic challenges, caste marginalization, and minority status, further restrict their political power, especially in isolated and vulnerable char areas.

The study emphasizes the important role of education and inclusive learning in empowering marginalized women. Literate women were more engaged in civic activities. This suggests that investing in education boosts knowledge and skills, and also builds confidence, decision-making abilities, and the capacity to influence community matters. In addition to

education, structural and institutional measures are necessary. Improving infrastructure, increasing representation in local councils, and launching awareness campaigns about political rights are essential steps to overcome social and economic barriers.

From a policy standpoint, the research shows the need for specific interventions that consider intersectionality and context. Programs aimed at women from backward classes, supporting adult literacy, encouraging self-help groups, and promoting participatory governance can open doors for sustained engagement. Improvements to infrastructure, especially in flood-prone char areas, can enhance access and participation.

Finally, the study highlights a significant gap in research on Muslim women in Assam's char regions. Future research should look into long-term trends in political engagement, assess the impact of educational and empowerment programs, and explore how technology and digital platforms can boost civic participation. Addressing these gaps, along with targeted policy measures, can improve the democratic inclusion of marginalized women and promote fair governance and social empowerment in one of India's most vulnerable regions.

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