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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN CHAR AREAS OF ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MORIGAON DISTRICT

Irfanul Islam*

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science MSSV, Nagaon Assam.

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Research Scholar, Department of Political Science MSSV, Nagaon Assam.

Published on: 20 August 2025Email Id: irfanulislam909@gmail.com,

ABSTRACT

The political participation of Muslim women in India is shaped by the interaction of gender, religion, region, and socio-economic class. In Assam, this situation is further complicated by the unique geographical and cultural characteristics of the char areas, which are riverine islands formed by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. These regions are marked by ecological vulnerability, high poverty rates, limited connectivity, and poor access to education and healthcare. The Muslim population in char areas, including Morigaon district, is among the most marginalized social groups in Assam. Within this community, Muslim women face a double burden of marginalization: as women and as members of a religious minority living in environmentally fragile and economically backward areas. This review article explores the challenges, barriers, and opportunities for Muslim women's political participation in the char areas of Morigaon. Using secondary sources, government reports, academic literature, and NGO documentation, the study places the issue in the wider context of gendered political participation in India while concentrating on local dynamics in Assam. It identifies key challenges such as low literacy, purdah norms, economic dependency, mobility restrictions, and limited awareness of rights and entitlements. The review also highlights emerging trends, including the role of grassroots organizations, microfinance groups, social media, and increasing educational aspirations among younger women. The paper argues that while Muslim women in Morigaon's char areas are underrepresented in formal politics, they are gaining visibility in informal and community-based leadership roles. This change, though uneven, shows a gradual assertion of agency within marginalized spaces. The review concludes with a discussion of research gaps and policy recommendations to enhance women's participation as a necessary part of inclusive democracy in Assam.

KEYWORDS: Muslim women, political participation, char areas, Morigaon, Assam, marginalization, gender, democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is a key measure of democratic inclusion. It includes more than just voting in elections. It also covers representation in decision-making processes, engagement in community organizations, contesting elections, and influencing policies at local and state levels. In India, women's political participation has traditionally been limited due to patriarchal norms, economic dependency, and unequal access to education. For Muslim women, these challenges are made worse by religious stereotypes, socio-economic disadvantages, and cultural practices that often limit mobility (Hasan & Menon, 2004).

The situation in Assam is unique. Assam is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state where Muslims make up around 34% of the population (Census of India, 2011). A large number of Assamese Muslims live in char areas—riverine regions of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. These chars are ecologically fragile, prone to frequent erosion, and lacking basic infrastructure like roads, schools, and hospitals. The people in these areas live in extreme poverty, with low levels of literacy and poor health indicators (Hazarika, 2016). Women, in particular, suffer the most from this deprivation.

Morigaon district is a crucial case study within Assam. Located in central Assam, Morigaon has a significant Muslim population, with most living in char villages. Due to cultural and religious practices like purdah, these women often remain confined to the private sphere. Such limitations result from restricted mobility and patriarchal control over economic and political choices (Choudhury, 2018). The interplay of geography, religion, and gender produces a form of triple marginality: as char residents, as Muslims, and as women.

Despite these challenges, char areas also show instances of resilience. Women engage in self-help groups (SHGs), microfinance collectives, literacy programs, and informal networks that indirectly influence local politics. Some women have even contested elections at the panchayat level, though in limited numbers. The implementation of 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has opened doors to formal politics, albeit with uneven participation (Sharma & Hussain, 2017).

This review article aims to examine the intersection of gender, religion, and marginality in shaping the political participation of Muslim women in Morigaon's char areas. Specifically, it explores three interconnected questions:

1. What are the main socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers to Muslim women's political participation in Morigaon's char areas?
2. What emerging trends and forms of agency are encouraging greater involvement of women in political processes?
3. What lessons can be learned from comparable contexts, and what research gaps still exist?

By bringing together existing literature and reports, this article aims to contribute to discussions on inclusive democracy and highlight the policy implications of empowering marginalized women in fragile regions like Assam's chars.

Historical & Socio-Political Context

To understand the political participation of Muslim women in Assam, one must consider the broader socio-political history of the state. Assam's demographic makeup has been influenced by waves of migration, especially from East Bengal during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. The settlement of Bengali-speaking Muslims in char areas formed a distinct socio-cultural group, often labeled as "immigrants" or "Bangladeshis" (Weiner, 1983). This political narrative has marginalized Muslim communities in Assam and negatively impacted their political representation.

Historically, women in char areas were relegated to household roles, with limited access to education. Missionary schools and later government programs struggled to reach many char villages due to geographic isolation and recurring floods (Saikia, 2011). Consequently, literacy rates among Muslim women in chars remained very low, often below 20% when compared to the state average of 67% (Census, 2011). Low literacy rates hinder political awareness and engagement with state institutions.

Following independence, the introduction of Panchayati Raj through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) established a legal framework for women's political inclusion. In Assam, women have contested and won seats in local governing bodies, but participation from char areas has been limited. Social norms often prohibit women from appearing in public spaces, and those elected frequently act as proxies for male relatives (Baruah, 2013).

Morigaon district exemplifies these trends. The district has a population of about 957,853, with Muslims making up nearly 52% (Census, 2011). Char villages such as Bhuragaon, Moirabari, and Lahorighat are predominantly Muslim. Political mobilization in these areas frequently revolves around identity, land rights, and citizenship issues (Hussain, 2019). However, women have rarely been at the forefront of these movements. Instead, their political agency manifests through community resilience against erosion, displacement, and poverty.

The emergence of civil society organizations and NGOs since the 1990s has generated new opportunities for women's agency. Groups like the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and local NGOs have worked to empower char women through literacy campaigns, health programs, and microcredit initiatives. These efforts have not only improved socio-economic conditions but also increased awareness of rights and entitlements, setting the stage for greater political participation.

Thus, the socio-political landscape of Morigaon's char areas reveals a history of marginalization along with the slow emergence of new opportunities for women's participation.

Barriers to Political Participation

Muslim women in Morigaon's char areas encounter several overlapping barriers that limit their political engagement

1. Mobility Restrictions and Purdah

Cultural practices like purdah restrict women's visibility in public spaces. Attending political meetings, campaigning, or even voting independently is often frowned upon. Women trying to engage politically face social stigma and accusations of dishonoring family values (Ahmed, 2015).

2. Economic Dependency

Most households in the chars rely on agriculture and daily wage work. Women typically do not own land or have their own income. Economic dependence on male relatives diminishes their bargaining power and limits their ability to fund electoral campaigns (Sharma & Hussain, 2017).

3. Low Literacy and Political Awareness

The literacy rate among women in Morigaon's chars is considerably lower than the state average. Illiteracy hampers their ability to understand political processes, read ballots, or interact with government schemes. A lack of awareness about rights and entitlements perpetuates exclusion (Saikia, 2011).

4. Social Stigma and Patriarchy

Patriarchal views within both Muslim and broader Assamese societies create further obstacles. Women in leadership roles are often regarded as token representatives or "proxies" for male relatives (Baruah, 2013).

5. Geographical Isolation and Ecological Vulnerability

Chars are susceptible to erosion and floods, leading to frequent displacement. When survival is at stake, political participation takes a backseat. Isolation also means limited access to polling stations, government offices, and civic institutions (Hazarika, 2016).

6. Religious and Identity Politics

In Assam's polarized political environment, Muslim communities often band together around identity issues. Women's concerns—such as healthcare, education, and domestic violence—are often overlooked in favor of community survival strategies (Hussain, 2019).

These barriers collectively create a systemic exclusion that prevents Muslim women in Morigaon's char areas from fully exercising their democratic rights.

Emerging Trends & Agency

Despite these barriers, recent decades have brought about notable changes:

Grassroots Movements and NGOs: Local organizations have mobilized women through literacy drives, health awareness programs, and training sessions. These initiatives help build confidence and skills that can be applied in political arenas.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Microfinance programs have economically empowered women. Many SHGs in Morigaon have evolved into political platforms, allowing women to collectively voice their demands.

Education and Youth Aspirations: Increasing numbers of girls are enrolling in schools, albeit unevenly, which is shifting aspirations. Young Muslim women are showing more interest in pursuing careers, including political roles.

Social Media and Technology: Even in remote areas, mobile phones and social media provide new channels for political awareness. Younger women are using WhatsApp and Facebook to share information and mobilize peers (Khan, 2020).

Reservation in Panchayati Raj: The 33% reservation has allowed Muslim women to participate in local politics. Although many remain symbolic representatives, some are increasingly asserting their independent agency.

These trends indicate that political participation, while limited, is evolving. Women in Morigaon's chars are finding new forms of agency within challenging contexts.

Comparative Insights

A comparative perspective reveals both similarities and differences. In states like West Bengal and Bihar, Muslim women in rural areas also face mobility restrictions and economic dependency but have shown higher participation in local governance due to stronger NGO networks (Jahan, 2018). In Kerala, higher literacy and active social reform movements have empowered Muslim women to achieve greater political representation (Devika, 2010).

Compared to these situations, Assam's char areas face unique disadvantages due to ecological vulnerability and complex identity politics. However, the slow rise of self-help groups, NGO support, and changing youth aspirations in Morigaon mirror trends in other regions, pointing to a potential for future transformation.

Research Gaps

Current studies on political participation in Assam mainly focus on identity politics, migration, and ethnic conflicts. Few provide a gendered analysis of char areas, and even fewer concentrate specifically on Muslim women in districts like Morigaon. Micro-level studies documenting women's voices, lived experiences, and localized agency are limited.

Additional research is required on

- The role of digital media in fostering women's participation in chars.
- Case studies of women leaders in char panchayats.

- Comparative analyses between Muslim and non-Muslim women in similar regions.
- The long-term effect of SHGs and microfinance on political empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The political participation of Muslim women in the char areas of Morigaon illustrates the complex relationship between gender, religion, and geography. Historically marginalized, these women face obstacles of illiteracy, poverty, purdah, and ecological vulnerability. Nevertheless, emerging trends—such as SHGs, NGO mobilization, youth aspirations, and digital networks—signal gradual shifts toward agency and empowerment.

For inclusive democracy in Assam, it is vital to acknowledge the agency of char women and create supportive conditions. Policy measures should prioritize women's education, economic independence, and leadership development. Civil society and NGOs need to provide greater support networks, while government initiatives must address the specific ecological and social circumstances of the char areas.

Ultimately, the story of Muslim women in Morigaon's char areas is one of resilience in the face of adversity. Their participation may be limited in formal politics, but in their daily survival, community contributions, and informal leadership, they are already active political agents. Strengthening this participation is not just about ensuring representation; it is about enhancing democracy in one of India's most vulnerable regions.

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