

Faith, Gender and Empowerment: Understanding Experiences of Muslim Women in 'Char' Areas of Assam through the Lens of 'Standpoint Feminism'

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"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."¹

Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin

The debate over 'objectivity' and 'relativism' in research leads to the importance of standpoint theory. While the view 'personal is political' is a major dominant theme for the feminists, there are substantial differences in experiences of women; they continue to have different positions or 'standpoint' on issues which are personal in character.²As Zoya Hasan notes, 'Muslim women are triply disadvantaged — as members of a minority, as women, and most of all as poor women.'³The 'char areas' are riverine areas or islands of the Brahmaputra river, covering around 3.60 lakh hectares of land and having a population of more than 2.4 million.⁴Because of riverine erosion and recurring annual floods, even the location of chars keeps changing, putting extra hardships on the people who live in these underdeveloped areas. Lack of government infrastructure and facilities, accessibility through roads and employment opportunities have further aggravated to the backwardness of these regions, where 80 per cent of the population lives below poverty line.⁵ That is why the Government of Assam has a dedicated a 'Directorate of Char Areas Development' to improve the condition of people in these regions. Illiteracy and poverty are a near uniform phenomenon in the char areas, and deprivation, marginalization as well as discrimination has been internalized by women. Based on a field study (2017-19) in 'char' areas of Dhubri LAC, this paper analyses the complex issue of religion and gender justice for Muslim women from a 'standpoint feminist'

perspective. Furthermore, this article substantiates that the issue of empowerment and gender justice for the same must be seen from a holistic perspective wherein politics, security and rights of women are complexly woven together.

Standpoint Feminism: The concept

Feminist research seeks to empower as well as emancipate women; furthermore it 'is connected with the issue of feminist struggle and it challenges those basic structures and ideologies that oppress women.'⁶However, '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.'⁷As 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.'⁸Indeed, 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.'⁹ 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 studying¹⁰ 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.'¹¹According 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.*¹²

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.'¹³ Indeed, understanding lives and political choices and opinions of women in 'char' areas in Dhubri Legislative Assembly Constituency (henceforth LAC) of Assam have to be understood from their perspective.

Religion and Gender Justice: Experience of women from Dhubri LAC

Studies on Muslim women in different parts of the world reflect that marriage serves as an 'economic substitute for paid employment in the workforce'.¹⁴ Likewise, patriarchal norms are accepted by Muslim women because it is linked with areas which are dependent upon agricultural produce. 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 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.'¹⁵ It is a sexual division of labour, which tends to lead to subordination of women and subsequently such norms are internalized and socialized.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ While personal laws have been anti-women, reforms of the same should be undertaken with care.

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).¹⁸ 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 interpreting 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 areas 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.¹⁹ 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. Fazilatun Bewa, a 36 year old mother of 5 children and a resident of Majerchar says, 'People in this char co-exist with each other. Polygamy is common but we women have adjusted to it. We have no place to go to. We have to adjust and live in this society. 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.'²⁰

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. Rinku Banu says, 'My husband bears 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.'²¹

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'.²² 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 they remain oblivious to 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 or '*maulvis*' in char areas have played an important part in shaping political perception and opinions. Hamida Begum (60 years, Bhasani Char) says, "The religious leaders openly tell us whom to vote for and he is not being questioned since he is a religious scholar and his opinion is always considered to be right. We always visit the religious leaders whenever we face familial problem."²³ 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 the 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. Jamila recalls, "I never complain of any domestic abuse because it will lead to my social ostracism". Essentially women and their lifestyles face challenges 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.'²⁴ Jamila further says, 'If any woman faces any problem, the village elders and Gram Sevak and the religious leaders solve the same. We accept it as we do not know whom to approach. We are poor too; we can't go anywhere else.'²⁵ The women of char areas often have to make tough decisions — community needs versus individual choices. There is never any doubt that community concerns override 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, 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, Kuntirchar), 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.'²⁶ She is not alone. Fohima Khatun (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.'²⁷ The issue of reforms of personal laws is rather tricky, because the women also realise that the society is not yet ready to accept radical changes. However, it does

represent a dilemma for the women of the char areas. These women do not have the economic resources or adequate courage to seek help of formal state institutions to help their cause. 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. Farha Khatun (20 years old, Majir Char) says, 'Social norms have guided our behavior. I find it difficult to accept at times, but everybody follows it.'²⁸ 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 about 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. Kohinoor Khatun (42 years old, Kuntir Char) says, "Having 4 children is very common, 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 we also have long term goals for them. Running the household is difficult with so many children, but what can I do. I have limited choice.'²⁹

Empowerment and gender justice

Women's political empowerment is 'a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making.'³⁰ It is linked to a variety of factors, including 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. In this study conducted in the char areas, the field study 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.³¹ Many cases go unreported for fear of being shamed by 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.'³²

While most of the women Gaon Panchayat 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 per cent of the respondents are involved in some kind of daily wage-earning activity and this group of women has 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 grassroot bodies will be a critical factor in pushing forward the knowledge, experiences and needs of the women of char areas. Perhaps initiatives to strengthen and develop the capacities of women representatives at the grassroot level, will prove to be vital for protection of rights of women in the long run. Women representatives at the grassroot 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 are 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 pose questions to state institutions. Stronger women representatives will also mean better implementation of state policies and programmes. Jemin Ara, Gaon panchayat member of Gauripur Block says, 'I have ensured that women are able to open bank accounts in their names and I also see the implementation of construction of the road 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. Mamta Begum says, 'if we monitor personally when the roads are being made, the contractors to their work more diligently. Therefore, the women of our village often take turns to see the construction of roads in our village.'

The women Presidents of the Gaon Panchayat 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 have demanded that the 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, Ashifa Begum, the Panchayat President of Hatimari GP says, 'We are merely handicapped representatives and seldom have the men folk taken 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.'³³ Capacity building programme for grass root representatives is the need of the hour.

The voice of women in the private sphere is rather 'low', but it is definitely gaining momentum. The women panchayat leaders have shown that the needs and wants of the women can be articulated at the grassroot 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.

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 confined within social norms. Furthermore, women who have been engaged in income generating activities, beyond their family household work, have been found to be more aware of changing trends in politics and to 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.

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'³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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'.³⁶ Hartsock argues, feminist standpoint 'expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations.³⁷ Feminist standpoint theorists offer a critique of theories constructed by men, who put themselves in the position of policy makers³⁸ 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.'³⁹ 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.'⁴⁰ 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.'⁴¹ Indeed, the decisions 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.

Conclusion

The standpoint of women of char areas is best articulated at the grassroots level, where visibility of women is becoming more prominent than ever before. It may be a small change, but it will definitely have long term positive ramifications. The participation of Muslim women in politics is generally low and primordial factors such as religion and customs have defined their nature of involvement. The field study reveals that reservation of seats for women at the Panchayat level has helped bring 'visibility' to 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. Furthermore, there are low levels of political awareness and civic knowledge is very poor in these riverine areas. Perhaps poverty, social norms, religion and illiteracy have been major obstacles to qualitative participation of women in politics. In the char areas, despite the 'knowledge gap' women do take active part in the act of voting, but remain 'spectators' in other perspectives of participation. 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 behaviours are dominated by fears of being marginalized and disenfranchised rather than by individual welfare. Issues of development, literacy, corruption have 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.

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