Chapter : 9

Chapter 9

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Women are a major force behind life pattern of society not only today but since the time immemorial. Women have been playing a vital role since ages in households as well as on farms. Rural development is the dynamic process of development of the rural people through various programmes and projects so that they can become self-reliant citizens of the country. The work is done by involving various agencies and organizations, and above all, the local people themselves. The present study on **Participation of Women in Rural Development: A Comparative Study of Three Villages in Jorhat District** attempts to find out the level of women's participation in different rural development programmes and other rural well-being activities with a comparative frame of understanding in the context of three villages; namely, Chari Gaon, Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon in Jorhat district in Assam. This chapter summarises the entire discussion to present findings and conclude the study in the following pages.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on oral responses of the women engaged in rural development programmes and other rural organizational activities in the villages. All the women, engaged in rural development programmes in Balijan Gaon, Randhanijan Gaon and Chari Gaon constitute the universe and each woman represents a unit of the study. For comparative analysis, the three villages; namely, Chari Gaon, Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon, each, dominated by the General Castes, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes respectively were selected purposively. Stratified random sampling was used to select 10% respondents out of the total adult women's population and 50% of their Self-Help Groups, with all members of those were taken as respondents, constituting the social strata of caste, class and religion, in the respective village. For sampling of respondents a list of the women for each village was prepared by conducting household census. Besides, all the women participating in MNREGS were selected as the respondents. Thus, there are three types of women respondents from each village; viz; (i) women from households, (ii)

women from SHGs and (iii) the women participating in MNREGS. The data were collected through a structured interview schedule administered to the women sampled by using random sampling for three groups of each of the three villages. The three groups of respondents are briefly introduced here:

(i) Household Women: First of all, a list of the adult women in the three villages was prepared by conducting household census in each *Chuck*. After that the households were stratified into 4 caste group, i.e, General, OBC, SC and ST. From each caste group's households, 10% of the total adult women (excluding SHGs members and MNREGS participants) were selected as respondents using simple random sampling (lottery method).

(ii) Women from SHGs: The SHGs were selected by drawing lottery, making a sample of 24 SHGs and 287 women, in all, from the three villages. While selecting them they were also classified according to year of establishment and 50%, taking at least one, was selected. At the first stage, the SHGs in each village were enlisted by the year of their establishment ranging from 1999 to 2011, which were 43, in all, and 17, 10 and 16 for the respective village.

(iii) The Women Participating in MNREGS: In Balijan Gaon and Randhanijan Gaon there are 3 and 12 women respectively, participating in MNREGS and all of them are selected as respondent. Therefore, sample size of the study is 119 from households, 287 from SHGs and 15 from MNREGS participants and in total it is 421respondents from the three villages. Chari Gaon had no MNREGS women participants.

Therefore, sample size of the study comprises 119 women from households, 287 women as members of SHGs and 15 women participants in MNREGS. In total, it is 421respondents from the three villages.

THE LOCALE

The three villages; namely, Chari Gaon, Randhanijan and Balijan where the study was conducted are located in the Jorhat district of the upper Assam. The Jorhat district comprises three sub divisions; namely, Jorhat, Majuli and Titabor; six revenue circles; eight development blocks; 866 villages and two towns; namely, Jorhat and Mariani. Its area is 2352 sq km; population is 1,091,295: males- 557,944 (51.12 per

cent) and females- 533,351(48.88 per cent) and literacy rate is 83.42 per cent: males- (88.38 per cent) and females- (78.22 per cent) (www.census2011.co.in/census/district/154-jorhat.html downloaded on15.03.2012; www.indiamapia.com/jorhat.html downloaded on 15.03.2012). The villages for the present study, Charigaon and Randhanijan fall under North-West Jorhat Development Block (Dhekargarah) and Balijan fall under Jorhat Development Block (Baghchung), in the range of 10-12km from the Jorhat town.

On the east of Charigaon is Baghmoria, a village dominated by a General caste (Kalita), on the west are two villages Rangajan and Gojpuria dominated by a General caste (Kalita), on the north are other two villages- Maout Gaon dominated by an OBC (Ahom) and Danhikhor dominated by Muslims and on the south are three villages Kolakhowa, Bamungaon and Kotohaboria, all dominated by a General caste (Kalita). There are four castes in the village; viz, Brahmins, Kalitas, Koch and Chutias. Majority of the villagers belong to Kalita caste, a General Caste. In Charigaon, the agriculture based economy has now turned into the economy that is based on service sector. Most of the villagers have got government employment by dint of their qualifications and many others also have got opportunity to engage themselves in different industries and companies in towns and cities. The villagers have the modern type of houses made of materials such as tin for roof, cement for flooring and bricks for walls brought from neighbouring town Jorhat. The educational institutions are situated within a reachable distance for the majority of households. Therefore, the educational level of the villagers is high. Most of the villagers can speak different languages like Hindi, English and Bengali, besides their mother tongue. They can also read and write these languages. Most of the people of the village took part in the Indian national freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. The various transport facilities are available due to good condition of roads. Auto rickshaw, tempos, wingers, magic are available as modes of transportation. A metalled road from Jorhat town to the historical Nematighat passes through the village.

On the north of the village Randhanijan are Rongagora village dominated by Scheduled Caste (Koibarta) and Malowpam village dominated by Scheduled Caste (Koibarta), on the south is Tingtingia village dominated by General caste (Kalita), on the east there is Borbheti village dominated by OBC (Koch) and Mojiabheti dominated by Scheduled Caste (Koibarta) and on the west there is Rowmarikhuti

village dominated by Scheduled Caste (Koibarta). Majority of the villagers belong to the Koibarta- a Scheduled Caste. Agriculture is the main economy of the villagers of Randhanijan. But some of the villagers have not cultivable land. So, they take land on sharecropping from their neighboring villagers. Some of the villagers have now started transport business with auto as share taxi from the main road to the Hoalmara. Most of the villagers have the traditional type of Assam type house with bamboo and mud walls with tin roof. Generally the houses consist of two-three rooms attached with kitchen. As the villagers have low economic status they are still following the traditional life styles for home decoration, water filter, vegetables storing, washing clothes etc. There are two primary schools and one high school in the village of Randhanijan. The villagers who have minimum education up to high school know English and Hindi. But they cannot write properly. Most of the villagers are politically not active. Due to lake of education, poor economic condition and awareness about political system the villagers do not actively participate in politics. Some of the villagers have their membership in different political parties and their active members are considered as local leaders. There is a health sub-centre, Randhanijan Sub-Health Centre, in Randhanijan, established in 1983. There is one ANM and one helper lady in the sub-centre. This sub-centre serves 7 neighbouring villages. In Hoalmara, at a distance of 4 kms from Randhanijan Gaon, there is a Public Health Centre (PHC), Hoalmara PHC, established in 1975. In Randhanijan Gaon, there are the facilities of water supply, electricity, telecommunication connectivity, etc. In the village, the sources of drinking water are both pond and deep tube well. Through government scheme the villagers have got deep tube well facility in the village in each Chuck (corner). A metalled road, Sengeli Ati road, is passing through the village from No. 37 National Highway. The various transport facilities are available due to the historical place of Borbheti and for the good condition of roads. A regular gram taxi plies between the Jorhat town and Hoalmara and touches Randhanijan.

On the north of the village Balijan is Na-Chungi village dominated by Scheduled Tribe (Thengal Kachari), on the south there is Bojalbari village and on the east there is Bongal village both dominated by Scheduled Tribe (Thengal Kachari) and on the west is Gajpuria village dominated by OBC (Chutia). Majority of the villagers belongs to a Scheduled Tribe, i.e., Thengal Kachari. Some villagers also

belong to other castes like Kalita, Koch and Chutias. As the villagers mainly depend on agriculture they are largely engaged in agriculture to fulfil their basic needs. Now-a-days, most of the literate villagers are involved in searching a better job in the urban centre. However, many of them are engaged in agricultural activities, through a modern way. The villagers have the modern type of houses, made of materials such as tin for roof, cement for flooring and bricks for walls brought from neighbouring town Jorhat. In the village there is a primary school. Besides, there are also two private schools Gyanjyoti Jatia Vidyalaya and Jalukanibari Jatia Vidyalaya, both established in 2009. There is a girls high school, Jalukanibari Girls High School, established in 1987. The villagers are politically aware to a great extent. There is a state dispensary, in the west of the village, in a neighbouring village of Balijan, Jalukanibari. Infrastructuraly, Balijan is a developed village which is having a good facility of electricity, telecommunication connectivity, water supply, roads, etc. Two metalled roads from Jorhat town to Titabor town, i.e, Na-Ali and Gar-Ali touches Balijan. The village lies between these two roads. So, there is good communication of transportation to the village. Regular bus services are available on both the roads. Besides, transport services of other vehicles such as auto rickshaws, tempos, etc are also available.

THE FINDINGS

The following are the major findings of the study.

A. Participation of Women in SGSY and MNREGS

(a) Participation of women in SGSY

1. SHGs under SGSY have Contributed to Diversification and Value Addition to the Items Produced

Handloom weaving, which is the oldest and widespread industry of the rural Assam, has found a prime place among the SHG activities. All the members of SHGs engaged in handloom production have their own handlooms where they weave the cloths like the *Mekhela-Chadar*, the traditional Assamese dress for women, and the *Gamocha,* the Assamese towel, which are a part and parcel of Assamese life. There is a great demand for these items, specially during the festivals of Rangali Bihu and Durga Puja. Four varieties of silk worms and their host-plants; namely, mulberry, Eri, Muga and Oak Tassar are popular and important for economic and commercial

purposes. They also produce some other clothes by weaving; namely, Rumal (Handkerchief), Salwar and Shirt piece, Door mate etc. Most of the SHGs are engaged in preparation of traditional Assamese food products in the three villages such as *Pitha, Larud, Chira, kumal rice* etc. They take order for marriage and other ceremonies. In Chari Gaon, an SHG named Sajagota (with all its members from Muslim community) produces spices and sweets like bhujia, *nimki, gulabjamun* etc. and sells these in the nearby hotels at Bahona Tini-Ali. In agriculture most of the SHGs are producing ginger, turmeric and food grains. During the cultivation women are actively engaged in sorting-out of seeds, uprooting and transplanting of seedlings, harvesting of paddy etc and earn a significant amount of money. Besides these, the SHGs are also engaged in poultry farming, knitting and embroidery, toy making, fruit processing, handicrafts etc. So, the routine household activities have been turned into economically profitable ventures after forming the SHGs. The SGSY programme influences the development of entrepreneurial skills, saving habit and banking practices among the rural people. It also encourages the people for collective work and commercialisation.

2. SHGs Provided a Method for Effectively Organizing Traditional Occupational Activities among the Poor Women

In the villages the sampled SHGs were found engaged in eight types of activities; namely, weaving, agriculture, poultry farming, traditional food making, embroidery & knitting, bee-keeping, fishery and piggery. Of these, weaving engaged all the SHGs, followed by agriculture and traditional food making in the three villages. Poultry farming and embroidery & knitting are two other significant activities engaging nearabout two fifths and one fifth of the SHGs respectively. The rest of the activities engaged 10 per cent to 20 per cent of the SHGs. This pattern of the SHG activity distribution is witnessed across the three villages.

3. SGSY Could be Useful in Developing Skills of Rural Women through Training Programmes

Over two fifths of the members had attended one training programme on their productive activity, followed by a one-third who had attended two training programmes. The rest attended three or more programmes. Over two fifths of the members in Charigaon, half of the members in Randhanijan and one third of the

members in Balijan participated in one training programme, followed by one third, each, of the members who participated in two programmes whereas one third of the members in Balijan and around two fifths, each, from Radhanijan and Balijan attended three or more training programmes. Thus, every member had undergone some training programme related to her SHG activity. The frequency of the training programmes which the members had undergone was higher in Balijan than in the other two villages, perhaps, due to availability of the state sponsored special training programmes for the Scheduled Tribe members. Similarly, in the Scheduled Caste dominated Randhanijan one finds the highest number of the members who have participated in one training programme. Thus, the SHG members, specially from the backward communities exhibited high level of motivation in the training programmes, perhaps, considering essential for their much-needed development.

4. SGSY has Increased Exposure of SHG Members to Business Opportunities

Nearabout half (46 per cent) of the SHGs have participated thrice or more exhibitions, *melas*, trade fairs etc. in the Jorhat town or in their own village, followed by their one third who participated twice. The rest had participated once only. Notwithstanding this, in the Scheduled Caste dominated Radhanijan a half of the SHGs participated in two opportunities, followed by their one third who participated in three or more opportunities. The highest participation has again come from the SHG members from the Scheduled Tribe dominated Balijan. In a way, SGSY has exposed the women to new business opportunities through training and enhanced their capacity.

5. SHGs and SGSY have Improved Economic Conditions of Poor Rural Women

Before the SHG formation, over one third of the respondents had no income; another one third had a monthly income of up to Rs 1000/-; over a one-fourth had monthly income in the income-bracket of Rs 1001-3000 and the rest had income in the income bracket of Rs 3001-5000 while after the formation of the SHGs the largest number (about three fifths) of the respondents were in the monthly income bracket of Rs 3001-5000, followed by over one fourth in the income-bracket of Rs 1001-3000 and the least number (over one tenth) in the income group of up to Rs 1000/-. Thus, the SHG formation squarely reversed their monthly income status in positive direction.

(b) Participation of Women in MNREGS

1. **MNREGS is Instrumental to Help Poor Rural Women, However, there are Social Barriers Also**

The MNREGS is a wage employment program, providing minimum wage employment to casual, unskilled labour, especially during lean season. Its larger aim is to generate savings and assets in the countryside, to promote a growth process based on local development. In Assam there are certain stereotypes about women that they are too weak to work and that working outside home lowers the social status of their families. It is the culture and society where doing menial work in public by women is not considered respectable. But most of the respondents informed that though they were willing to work, they did not get job under the scheme. In certain cases it was also found that although the names of women members were there on the job cards, but it was their husbands who actually worked. The male members are preferred by the Gaon Panchayat leaders keeping in mind their physical strength as required for the jobs. Very few women participated in the programme from Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon. But Chari Gaon had no MNREGS women participants. In order to maintain the socio-economic status the women of rich families generally do not want to join such kind of programme. In Assamese society generally women do not work as labour in outside home. They work as a labour only in the agricultural work. It is more seen in the general caste dominated villages of Assam. In Charigaon both the respondents from household members and SHGs members were asked the reason for not participating in the programme. It was found that the poor respondents were interested in the programme but their family members do not support them to join it. Because their male family members are able to give them the basic needs. Thus, patriarchy and male-dominance pose obstacles to empowerment of poor women through MNREGS.

2. MNREGS Contributes to Improvement of Infrastructure and to Livelihood of the Poor

In Randhanijan Gaon two major works were taken under MNREGA. One was construction of road, i.e, Tintingia-Randhanijan connecting road and another was digging a pond for public fishery. In Balijan Gaon only one work was taken under MNREGA, i.e, construction of Medhi Chuck Road. In Randhanijan Gaon road

construction work was done in the financial year 2009-10 and public fishery work was done in the financial year 2010-11. In the financial year 2009-10, 12 women were participating in the work but in the financial year 2010-11 only 5 women were participating. In Balijan Gaon the road construction work was done in the financial year 2008-09 and only 3 women were participating in the work. Participation of women is very less in MNREGS than SGSY. Basically the illiterate women participated in the programme. The literate women are not interested to do work under MNREGS. They thought it will decrease their social status.

One third (33.34 per cent) of the MNREGS participants worked for 20-29 days. Only 13.34 per cent participant worked for 50-59 days. It shows that the respondents have not got the work for minimum 100 days in a year. There are two major reasons behind it. Firstly, it is due to the less work taken under MNREGS in the villages. And secondly, the Panchayat leaders discriminates the women participants because of the heavy work pressure. But the MNREGS participants were very interested to do more works under the programme, because it helped them to get their livelihood.

3. MNREGS Women Participants Spent Earning on the Welfare of Their Families

In all, two thirds (60%) of the MNREGS participants said that the programme changed their attitude towards women's role in that type of work. After having participated in the programme they realised that women should come forward to join such kind of programme and should be economically independent. The programme also impacted upon the social outlook of the rural people. However, their participation has been only for shorts periods. Any lasting change in personality and life can come through participation for longer period and gaining of experiences in collectively. This programme helped in easing out the debt burden to some extent after the implementation of the MNREGA. The impact of MNREGA was also on family health care and children's education etc. Thus, major portion of women's earning spent for the welfare of the family. But the participants were not getting chance to do more works under the programme. Pervasive corruption is also observed in the selection of beneficiaries and distribution of job-cards in the three villages.

4. Social Factors did Determine Participation of Women in Rural Development Programmes

From the study it was found that some structural factors like age, caste, class, marital status, type of family etc. affect low participation of women in MNREGS in Assam. As far as age-wise distribution of participant workers in MNREGS programme is concerned, in Randhanijan Gaon near about three fifths (58.33%) of the participants belonged to the age group of 36-60 years and over two fifth (41.66%) belonged to the age group of 18-35 years. In Balijan Gaon over one fifth (66.66%) belonged to the age group of 36-60 and over one third (33.33%) belonged to the age group of 18-35. No MNREGS participants were found above 60 years in both the villages. It indicates that the old aged women were not participating in the programme.

In Randhanijan Gaon two thirds (66.66%) participants of MNREGS belonged to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and in Balijan Gaon cent per cent MNREGS participants belonged to Scheduled Tribes (STs). There was no MNREGS participant of General Castes in both the villages.

Marital status of the women also affects level of participation in MNREGS, due to family and other cultural factors. Over two thirds (78.37%) of SHGs members in Randhanijan Gaon were married and it was over four fifths (90.29%) in Balijan Gaon. Half (50%) of the MNREGS participants in Randhanijan Gaon were married and it was over one third (33.33%) in Balijan Gaon. In Randhanijan Gaon one fourth (25%) of the MNREGS participants were each unmarried widowed. But over one tenth (14.86%) of SGSY participants in Randhanijan Gaon were unmarried and a small fraction (6.75%) were widowed. In Balijan Gaon also a small fraction of respondents (5.82% and 3.88%) were unmarried and widowed.

Out of the MNREGS participant workers in Randhanijan Gaon three fourths (75%) came from the nuclear families and in Balijan Gaon it was two thirds (66.66%) and one fourth (25%) in Randhanijan Gaon were from joint families and it was over one third (33.33%) in Balijan Gaon. But in SGSY, over one fourth (29.79%) and about two thirds (65.04%) women came from joint families respectively in Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon. Thus, most of the MNREGS participant women are from nuclear family, they are widows or from poor families.

B. Participation of Women in Political Activities

1. There was High Level of Participation in Vote Casting among the Women

In the three villages, most (95.24%) of the respondents cast their vote in Panchayat elections, over four fifths (88.83%) in the elections for Legislative Assembly seats and over two thirds (67.93%) in the elections for Lok Sabha. In Panchayat elections all the respondents from Chari Gaon and Balijan Gaon and most (91.93%) of the respondents from Randhanijan Gaon cast their vote.

This shows a higher level of voting participation in Panchayat elections as compared to Assembly and Parliamentary elections and the difference is quite significant. It is due to the fact that Panchayat elections are held at the local level where women are directly concerned about the election of their representatives and vice-versa and also it brings immediate benefits.

Over two fifths (45.84%) of the respondents cast a vote of their own choice while over one fourth (27.55%) execute the choice of their male family members. While they cast vote of the respondents, nearly three fifths (56.29%) from Chari Gaon, over one third (35.48%) from Randhanijan Gaon and over two fifths (43.83%) from Balijan Gaon cast a vote of their own choice in the elections.

This shows that development enhances choice of vote casting as the difference between the choice among the respondents from Charigaon and Balijan Gaon (relatively developed) and Randhanijan (relatively backward) indicates it.

2. Their Participation in Campaigning Elections was Below Average

About half (49.40%) of the respondents take part in one or other forms of campaign activities: over two fifths (43.71%) from Chari Gaon, about one fourth (23.39%) in Randhanijan Gaon and over three fourths (77.40%) in Balijan Gaon. As compared to their voting participation, the respondents' participation in campaigning is very low: over a half (50.48%) participated in public meetings and the rest in the activities of persuading friends and neighbours.

Over three fourths (75.86%) of the respondents from Randhanijan Gaon have participated in the public meetings while over two fifths (40.70%) of the respondents from Balijan Gaon and two thirds (66.66%) of the respondents from Chari Gaon have

participated in the activities of persuading friends and neighbours. Of the respondents over four fifths (80.28%) participated in the campaign activities within the village: over four fifths of the respondents from Chari Gaon (81.81%) and Balijan Gaon (82.30%) and over three fifths (68.96%) Randhanijan Gaon.

It means that the women are constrained by their mobility during campaigns due to tradition and security reasons. Hence, most of them campaigned in their villages.

3. Participation in Public Meetings was High among the Women

Nearly three fourths (71.73%) of the respondents participated in the public meetings called by the Gaon Panchayat leaders like Ward Members, Pradhan etc along with the *Gaonbura* (village headman) to inform the villagers about various rural development programmes, to discuss the problems faced by the villagers, to settle the disputes of the villagers etc. Over three fourths (75.49%) of the respondents from Chari Gaon, nearly one third (64.51%) from Randhanijan Gaon and nearly three fourths (73.97%) from Balijan Gaon participated in the meetings.

Near about three fifths (58.19%) of the respondents sought political information from their family members followed by the political leaders, party members, prominent members of society etc. constituting over a half (53.91%). Near about a half (48.93%) of the respondents got information through T.V. and the rest through newspapers and radio. By village, over a half (52.98%) of the respondents from Chari Gaon and nearly three fourths (73.97%) from Balijan Gaon got information from the political leaders, party members, prominent members of society etc. while in Randhanijan Gaon near about half (49.19%) of the respondents got information from their family members.

Over three fourths (78.38%) of the respondents were aware about the provision of reservation of seats for women in local bodies while over two fifths (40.14%) of them were aware about the percentage of reservation for women. Nearly three fifths (57.95%) of the respondents knew the name of the Member of Legislative Assembly of their legislative constituency while about two fifths (35.62%) and nearly one third (30.16%) of the respondents knew the name of Prime Minister and President of India respectively.

It indicates that the respondents were more aware about their local political leaders than the P.M. and President of India due to their interest.

4. Participation in Political Parties as Members was Near Average Level

Of the respondents over half (52.25%) were having membership in political parties: nearly three fifths (58.27%) from Chari Gaon, and over a half (50.80% and 52.74% each) from Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon. All the women respondents having membership in political parties were village level ordinary members of different political parties. There was no woman holding a position in the party and the membership at the district and state levels. Over a half (53.18%) of the respondents were having membership in Indian Congress Party, followed by Assam Gana Parishad (a regional party of Assam), constituting nearly one fourth (24.09%) of the respondents. Over half of the respondents from each village were members in Indian Congress Party.

It was found that SGSY programme had impact on taking membership in political parties by the respondents. The members of SHGs got a platform to develop their personality, communication skills, knowledge about current affairs of the world etc. which influenced them to become a member of political party.

Besides, nearly three fifths (55.58%) of the respondents were having membership of one social organization and nearly one fifth (18.05%) were having membership of more than one social organization while over one fourth (26.36%) were not members of any social organization. By village, over three fifths (62.91%) from Chari Gaon, over two fifths (42.74%) from Randhanijan Gaon and over three fifths (60.27%) of the respondents from Balijan Gaon were having membership of one social organization.

These social organizations take up various activities for well-being of their village. Thus, it appears that membership of women in social organizations is higher than in political parties. It was because active involvement in political parties is more complex and time-demanding activity than participation in social organizations. Moreover, in some instances politics is taken as men's domain and the family members do not allow women to participate in party politics.

5. Participation in Elections as Contestants was Very Low

A small portion (2.13%) of the respondents has contested the different Panchayat elections: 1.98% from Chari Gaon, 1.61% from Randhanijan Gaon and 2.73% from Balijan Gaon have contested in different Panchayat elections. All of these had contested Panchayat elections for the first time and once. They got the chance to contest in the elections because of the reservation of seats for women. The low level of participation of women in contesting elections is because contesting election owes to the most complex nature of the political activity which is not simply a matter of choice rather conditioned by the availability of funds, party support, opportunity and above all the interest of women. Besides, there are number of factors responsible for the low level of participation in the election. The nomination of candidate depends on the decisions of the executive body of political parties which selects the candidate mainly on the basis of the standing of the candidate in the party, the popularity level of the person in the constituency, the possibility of winning the election.

Over four fifths (88.88%) of the respondents contested the Gaon Panchayat elections and over one tenth (11.12%) contested the Anchalik Panchayat elections. By village, all the respondents both from Chari Gaon and Randhanijan Gaon contested the Gaon Panchayat elections. In Balijan Gaon three fourths (75%) of the respondents had contested the Gaon Panchayat elections and one fourth (25%) had contested the Anchalik Panchayat elections. Of them nearly three fifths (55.56%) were inspired by a political party and over one fifth (22.22% each) by their family members and by their friends and neighbours. Of those who were inspired by a political party are over three fifths (66.66%) from Randhanijan Gaon and 50% from Balijan Gaon, i.e., two villages of backward populations.

6. Political Participation Caused Improvement of Overall Status and Efficiency in Society

Political participation is no doubt an important indicator affecting women's empowerment and status. Almost all of the respondents who have so far participated in one or other form of political activities report that they have noticed a gradual change in their status in society. Nearly three fourths (69.59%) of the respondents feel that political participation helps them improve their communication skills and social outlook, over three fifths (61.75%) of the respondents say that by participating in

political activities they were able to develop their personality, over two fifths (45.84%) of the respondents tell that it helps them participate in decision making at family and community level and over two fifths (41.33%) of the respondents find that they were able to assert their position in the family and societal level. By village, about three fourths (74.17%) of the respondents from Chari Gaon say that political participation helps them improve their communication skills and social outlook and from Randhanijan Gaon it was over three fifths (61.29 per cent) of the respondents. Nearabout four fifths (78.08%) of the respondents in Balijan Gaon tell that it helped in changing their personality.

Now, not only they assert their position but also enjoy the power to participate in various decision-making processes at the family and societal levels. They are also able to bring different issues related to women in public sphere. The inclusion of women in the political power structure and their proportionate participation will thus not only bring gender issues to the forefront but also help in correcting the existing gender differences leading to women's empowerment and advancement in society.

C. Participation of Women in Educational and Health Programmes

(a) Participation of Women in Educational Programmes

1. Participation in Educational Programmes Increased Their Motivation for Children's Education

Of the 421 respondents, over two fifths (42.05%) of the respondents were having child. And out of them over four fifths (86.44%) were having school going child. And 24 respondents (13.56%) were having small child below 3 years. The respondents who have school going chid played different roles in their education.

It is found that over three fifths (64.70%) of the respondents said that they provide necessary goods to their child for their study, followed by nearly three fifths (59.47%) of the respondents who encourage the child to go to school regularly. Over two fifths (42.48%) of the respondents supervise the child in their study and nearly one third (30.06%) of the respondents creates awareness among their child about the importance of education in their life. By village, nearly three fourths (73.84%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon helps their child in education by providing them the

necessary material for study and it was cent percent in Randhanijan Gaon, over three fifths (64.58%) in Balijan Gaon.

2. Socio-Economic Conditions Have Impact on Their Awareness about Their Children's Education

There are some reasons in the villages for not sending child to school. But in Charigaon the respondents are very conscious about education and so they send their child to school. Poverty is not a bar for education in Charigaon. Over two fifths (41.66%) of the respondents were ignorant about the importance of education, followed by poverty constituting over one fourth (29.16%) of the respondents. Over one fifth (20.83%) of the respondents were illiterate and they did not realise the importance of their child's education, rather they thought education is not necessary for labour class people like them. Nearly one tenth (8.33%) of the respondents lacks of knowledge about different educational programmes in school like SSA, ICDS.

By village, nearly two fifths (38.88%) of the respondents each in Randhanijan Gaon did not sent their child to school due to poverty and lake of realization of importance about education in life. In Balijan, poverty is not a factor for it, but it is the factor of lack of education of the parents and ignorance of the parents about the importance of education constituting each half (50%) of the respondents.

3. Their Participation in Education Spread Awareness in Community

The educated women respondents tried to motivate their neighbours about SSA and the importance of education in life. Nearly three fifths (56.59%) of the respondents gave information to their neighbours about SSA and ICDS and the facilities under these programmes. Over two fifths (43.40%) of the respondents motivated their neighbours towards education by telling them about the importance of education in human life. They also encouraged the neighbours to send their child to schools. By village, over half (53.48%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon gave information to their neighbours about SSA and ICDS and the facilities under these programmes. It was over three fifths (68.18%) of respondents in Randhanijan Gaon and over half (53.44%) in Balijan Gaon.

4. Most of Them were Aware about Educational Programmes in Village

Nearly three forth (73.87%) of the respondents were aware about the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme. By village in Chari Gaon over four fifth (85.43%) of the respondents, in Randhanijan Gaon over half (53.22%) and in Balijan Gaon over three forth (79.45%) of the respondents were aware about the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme. It reveals that over four fifths (81.23%) of the respondents were aware about the ICDS and nearly one fifth (18.77%) were not aware. Nearly three fifths (59.06%) of the respondents were aware about the role of Anganwadi workers to control nutritional anaemia of pregnant women and lactating mothers. About one third (32.45%) of the respondents were aware about the role of Anganwadi workers in confirmation of immunization of the children in village.

By village, over half of the respondents in Chari Gaon and Randhanijan Gaon (52.59% and 52.43% respectively) were aware about the role of Anganwadi workers to control nutritional anaemia of pregnant women and lactating mothers. It was nearly three fourth (70.4%) in Balijan Gaon. In Balijan Gaon the awareness is high than the other two village.

It is due to their interest in the programme to get benefit of it, the respondents were conscious about the role and activities of the Anganwadi centres.

5. Most of Them were Aware about Teaching-Aids Facilities

All the respondents were aware about the Mid-day meal programme. Most (90.35%) of the respondents were aware about the sanitation facility. Over four fifths (89.71%) of the respondents were each aware about water facility and free text books facility in school under SSA. It means that majority of the respondents were aware about different facilities under SSA.

There are various facilities under ICDS for children in Anganwadi centres and also for the community people. Nearly four fifths (78.07%) of the respondents were aware about different facilities under ICDS in Anganwadi centres, followed by two thirds (66.66%) of the respondents who were aware about supplementary food. Over half (53.50%) were aware about regular health check-up facilities for children.

By village, in Chari Gaon over four fifths (87.40%), in Randhanijan Gaon over three fifths (62.19%) and in Balijan Gaon about four fifths (78.4%) of the respondents were aware about the teaching-aid facility in the Anganwadi centres. In Chari Gaon over four fifths (87.40%), over three fifths (62.19%) in Randhanijan Gaon and over three fourths (78.4%) of the respondents in Balijan Gaon were aware about the teaching-aid facilities in the centre.

It means that the respondents of Charigaon were more aware about it than the other two village women. Under ICDS, there are Anganwadi workers in each centre of the village.

(b) Participation of Women in Health Programmes

1. Awareness of Health and Health Programmes was on the Rise in the Villages

Over three fourth (77.19%) of the respondents were aware about the NRHM programme. In Chari Gaon most (93.37%), in Randhanijan Gaon nearly three fifths (57.25%) and in Balijan Gaon over three forth (77.39%) were aware about NRHM. The data show that three villages the women from Randhanijan Gaon were less informative about NRHM because they are not conscious about their health and lacked motivation to know new things clearly from the office workers or doctors or ASHA workers. ASHA also called as the women Health Volunteers (WHVs), a central functionality of NRHM is appointed for every 1000 population. It was found that over four fifths (86.93%) of the respondents know the ASHA worker in their area.

By village, in Chari Gaon and in Balijan most (94.70% and 92.46% respectively) of the respondents and in Randhanijan Gaon nearly three fourths (70.96%) know the ASHA worker in their area. ASHA ensures better access to universal immunization, safe delivery, new born care, and prevention of water borne and other communicable diseases, nutrition and sanitation. It is found that over three fifths (69.35%) of the respondents were aware about the functions of ASHA worker in their villages: in Chari Gaon nearly three fourths (74.83%), in Randhanijan Gaon over three fifths (64.51%) and in Balijan Gaon over three fifths (67.80%).

2. Women were Generally Satisfied With the Health Care They Received from the Public Health Centres

Over half (52.45%) of the respondents used private medical sector for regular health check up while over two fifths (47.55%) go to PHC for it. By village, over two thirds (67.57%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon used private medical sector for regular health check up and over two thirds (70.83%) in Balijan Gaon go to PHC for it. In Randhanijan Gaon no one respondents used to check up their health regularly, because they thought it is not necessary. They used to go to PHC or private medical sector if any member of their family is ill.

However, all the respondents used the private medical sector for serious cases. It is found that three fourths (75.29%) of the respondents consult doctor if any member of their family is not well: in Chari Gaon nearly four fifths (78.14%), in Randhanijan Gaon nearly three fifths (59.67%) and in Balijan Gaon over four fifths (85.61%). This indicated that there is a difference in the three villages in consulting doctor. In Randhanijan, because of the low economic status of the respondents, they were not able to consult a doctor immediately when a member of the family is ill. Generally they asked the pharmacist of a pharmacy in the town and takes medicines for any diseases. But if any member of the family is seriously ill or suffering any disease they used to go P.H.C or Jorhat Medical College.

3. Participation of Women was High in the Public Meeting Called for Dissemination of Awareness

Nearly three fourth (72.20%) of the respondents participated in the meetings: two thirds (66.22%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon, in Randhanijan Gaon about three fourths (74.19%) and in Balijan Gaon over three fourths (76.71%). Participation of the respondents in the meetings of ASHA workers from Randhanijan and Balijan villages was almost equal and high. But in Charigaon it is not very high.

It is because in Charigaon some of the villagers have well economic status and so they generally consult with private doctor and not interested to join such kind of meetings.

4. The Rural Women were Benefited to a Great Extent, by NRHM

About three fourths (74.34%) of the respondents said that they were benefited by the NRHM programme: two thirds (66.23%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon, over four fifths (82.25%) in Randhanijan Gaon and over three fourths (76.02%) in Balijan Gaon. The respondents from Randhanijan Gaon were more benefited by the programme than the other two villages respondents. The respondents of Randhanijan Gaon were economically not sound and so they prefer to go PHC than the private medical sector.

The respondents were benefited from the help of ASHA worker during pregnancy periods and also after delivery. They were also benefited by the doctors available under NRHM in their locality. They got various information and tips regarding healthcare from ASHA worker. It is found that nearly two fifths (36.42%) of the respondents said that they were benefited by the NRHM programme through the doctors available in their locality which helped them in any health problem faced by the family members. Nearly one third (31.94%) of the respondents were benefited by the doctors and ASHA workers during their and their daughters-in-law's pregnancy period and also after delivery. Nearly one third (31.62%) of the respondents were benefited by ASHA workers. They said that the ASHA worker in their locality gives various informations about health care.

By village, in Chari Gaon over half (52%) of the respondents said that they were benefited by the NRHM programme through the doctors available in their locality. In Randhanijan Gaon nearly two fifths (39.21%) of the respondents were benefited by the doctors and ASHA workers during their pregnancy and also after delivery. In Balijan Gaon nearly half (48.64%) of the respondents said that they were benefited by the NRHM programme through the doctors available in their locality.

D. Participation of women in Agriculture, Household and Socio-cultural Activities

1. Women Engaged in Agriculture in the Villages Performed All the Activities, except Ploughing

Women play a significant and crucial role in agricultural development and allied fields including, in the main crop production, livestock production, horticulture, post-harvest operations, agro-social forestry, fisheries etc. About four fifths (79.80%)

of the respondents participate in the agricultural activities: around three fourths (76.15% and 75%) in Chari Gaon and in Randhanijan Gaon respectively and over four fifths (87.67%) in Balijan Gaon. The respondents from Balijan Gaon participated more in agricultural works than those of the other two villages. It is because agriculture is the main occupation for most of the villagers of Balijan Gaon.

Over one fifth (20.19%) of the respondents do not participate in the agricultural activities because they are either landless (54.11%) or give their land on sharecropping basis (45.89%). In Chari Gaon, nearly three fifths (58.33%) of the respondents gives their land to sharecroppers and so they do not participate in agricultural activities. In Randhanijan Gaon nearly three fourths (70.96%) and in Balijan Gaon half (50%) of the respondents have no cultivable land. Their work outside the home does not permit any change in the role expectations of the family and the males. All these multiple roles of women are supposed to be a part of their role as ideal mothers, ideal wives and this deprives their right to an independent economic status.

Thus the nature and extent of female work participation are determined by some structural and demographic features and also by some institutional factors like family customs, habits, existence of group instincts. Moreover, time, health, social, religious and legal constraints, in addition to the level of education, income and occupation of the family are important determinants. Of the respondents most participate in transplantation of seedlings (96.72%) and in harvesting (94.64%) activity and the rest participated in weeding, sowing, uprooting of seedlings, threshing, irrigation etc. along with their male counterparts in the families. Rather, some agricultural works like transplantation and harvesting are done mainly by the female members of the families. The Respondents are involved in some of the most vital, arduous and hardest work in agricultural fields under difficult climate conditions. This includes bending for hours while weeding and transplanting in a knee-deep water and mud. This work division is traditionally followed. The male members do the works like ploughing, threshing and carrying crops from field which requires enough energy. So, women are not engaged in that works. But they usually do more than that because they alone have to take the burden of the domestic works, as the male members do not traditionally do such works. Besides, this kind of division of work overloading the respondents, there spent most of their time on farm. Thus, the

respondents engaged in different works on paddy field and also in the household, but their works has been overlooked and called as supplementary or supporting. They do hard works in the field but not get the earnings. The earnings go to the hand of male members of the family, who manage it.

2. The Female Work Participation was Higher in Paddy Crops Production

Agriculture is a time consuming work. The respondents spent a major time in a day on the farm. It is found that nearly two fifths (35.11%) of the respondents spent 8 hours in a day on farm followed by 12 hours and 10 hours, each, constituting one third and nearly one third (33.92% and 30.95%). By village, nearly two fifths (38.26%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon spent 8 hours on the farm. In Randhanijan Gaon also two fifths (40.86%) of the respondents spent 8 hours on the farm while in Balijan Gaon nearly two fifth (36.71%) of the respondents spent 12 hours on the farm.

As already mentioned that agriculture is the main occupation for most of the families in Balijan Gaon, therefore the respondents from this village are spending more time on farm than those from the other two villages.

3. The Women Had High Participation in Some Allied Activities as well

Besides agricultural works, the rural women in Assam are also engaged in allied activities as self-employed such as animal husbandry, husking paddy, drying and storing paddy, animal and bird scaring in the farm/field etc. Over four fifths (82.66%) of the respondents were engaged in the work of drying and storing paddy: over four fifths (84.76%) of Chari Gaon, nearly three fourths (72.58%) of Randhanijan Gaon and over four fifths (89.04 per cent) of Balijan Gaon. It is seen that the respondents of the three villages play an important role in agricultural and allied activities on their family farms.

4. Women seemed to be Invisible Input for Work in Family and Farm

Usually, rural women have a tight time-schedule in household activities. There are various types of household works in which the rural women of Assam are traditionally engaged; namely, cleaning and washing, cooking, taking care of children, weaving, sewing and knitting, husking and thrashing milching and kitchen gardening, horticulture etc. Most (97.62%) of the respondents prepared tea and breakfast and

served food/lunch to family members, as a daily routine work. And the rest were engaged in the duties of preparing children for school, sweeping and cleaning of house, washing clothes, cooking etc. Most (93.37%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon and all those in Balijan and Randhanijan also prepared tea and breakfast at home.

5. The Time Budget of the Rural Women was Over-Stretching Their Capacity

The time-budget of the respondents is allocated for cooking, processing food, fetching or transporting water, craft, kitchen gardening, caring animals, cleaning, washing etc. every day. There is a wide variation in the hours of engagement in different domestic works among various classes of rural society. It is found that over two fifth (44.18%) of the respondents spend 14 hours for various household activities like cleaning, washing, care of children, milching, caring animals etc. and the rest spend 12 hours, 10 hours and 8 hours.

By village, over half of the respondents in Chari Gaon and Balijan Gaon spend 14 hours for different household duties while in Randhanijan Gaon over one fourth (29.03%) of the respondents spend 12 hours for it.

Thus, among the domestic works the respondents from Scheduled Caste dominated Radhanijan devote less time than the respondents from other two villages. The respondents from Randhanijan were not engaged in several works. Due to their low economic condition some of them work in neighbour's houses. Hence, they did not get much time to engage in their own household activities.

6. Many Factors Affect Women's Social Participation Including Their Household and Economic Status and Traditional Customs and Attitudes Which May Either Promote or Inhabit Their Activities

The village women participate in the life of society through community association, religious groups and wide variety of other groups and organizations. The village women participates in different types of religious functions in their home and also in community like naamkirtans, boserekia sakam, Aai sakam, shardha, shiv puja, satyanarayan puja, lakshmi puja etc. The village woman performs different duties in the religious functions like cleaning the home, preparing food items, purchasing some goods for religious customs, invite the neighbours and relatives, take care of the

guests, join in the Naamkirtans etc. Most (98.57%) of the respondents participate in Naamkirtans.

By village, most (96.02%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon and all those of Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon participate in it. The village women perform different duties in the religious functions like cleaning home, preparing food items, purchasing some goods for religious customs, inviting neighbours and relatives, taking care of guests, joining in Naamkirtans etc. Most (96.19%) of the respondents participate in Naamkirtans as performers. By village, most of the respondents in Chari Gaon (96.02%) and Randhanijan (95.96%) and all in Balijan joins in Naamkirtans as a performers.

7. One's Own and Family's Development were Main Factors Behind Joining Social Organizations

The village women join as members of social organizations for their personality development, to help other women and children in their village, to develop cultural environment in villages etc. There are now three social organizations working in Charigaon; namely, Jana Kalyan Sangha, Chandrakala Mahila Society and Charigaon Surjyadoi Sangha and Library. In Randhanijan there are two organizations; namely, Sanmilita Yuva Manch and Navajagaran Sangha and Library and Balijan has two organizations; namely, Janajati Mahila Samiti and Surujmukhi Sangha and Library. It is found that over half (55.58%) of the respondents were members of one social organization. By village, over three fifths (62.91%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon were members of one social organization. In Randhanijan Gaon it is over two fifths (42.74%) and in Balijan Gaon it is over three fifth (60.27%).

8. The Village Women More Or Less Used Mass Media during Leisure Time

Over half (53.68%) of the respondents do access to newspapers. By village, over two thirds (70.86%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon have the habit of reading newspapers and in Balijan Gaon it is nearly half (47.94%) of the respondents while in Randhanijan Gaon only nearly two fifths (39.51%) of the respondents access to newspaper reading. Thus, the respondents of Chari Gaon access more to newspaper reading than the other two villages respondents. It is due to their education and family background and economic status.

There is a difference in the frequency of accessing newspaper reading among the respondents. The data shows that over half (56.63%) of the respondents used to read newspapers occasionally, on the other hand, over two fifths (43.36%) of the respondents read newspaper daily. In Chari Gaon over half (51.40%) of the respondents do read newspaper daily. In Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon over three fifths (63.26% and 64.28% respectively) of the respondents use to read newspaper occasionally. In Charigaon the respondents were economically sound so they can buy newspaper daily at home. Educational status of the respondents of Charigaon was also high than the other two village women.

Of the respondents291 (69.12%) have the habit of listening radio in the three villages. Most (89.34%) of the radio-listening respondents listen music, followed by over four fifths (86.25%) listening news. In Chari Gaon most (90.82%) of them listen both music and news and in Randhanijan Gaon and Balijan Gaon most (97.26% and 82.56% respectively) listen music. Thus, the villagers use radio mostly for listening songs and news.

About four fifths (79.09%) of the respondents have access to watching TV: four fifths (80.13%) of the respondents in Chari Gaon, in Balijan Gaon over four fifths (86.98%) and in Randhanijan Gaon over three fifths (68.54%). This means that electronic and visual media are more effective and popular among the village women than the print media. It is because the illiterate women can understand the news or any other discussion on TV and radio but they cannot access to newspaper.

CONCLUSION

In general, more or less women from the three villages are participating in different rural development programmes and other rural organizational activities. Self-Help Groups have come up as a sustainable organizational setup which disburses micro-credit to the poor women and encourages them to enter into entrepreneurial activities. By this way it empowers the rural women economically. Economic empowerment leads to social, political, entrepreneurial, health and educational empowerment of the women. In the three villages it is seen that before the formation of the SHGs most of the women's status was low in their families as well as in the village community. But after formation of the SHGs they got the opportunities to participate in the decision making in their families in the matters of their own health

care, major household purchases, visits to relatives or friends, purchase of daily household items, choosing a candidate or party for vote casting and thus it elevated their social status, giving them an independent identity. It could happen only because of their economic contribution to the family. After the SHG formation the members also developed self-confidence, improved communication skills, exposed more to mass media and external contacts, acquired entrepreneurial skills and got a new social outlook. The SHG effort helps the rural women in increasing earnings, raising income levels and improving financial status. It is slowly but steadily changing scenario of Assamese rural women's participation in development. Thus, the SHG approach plays a vital role to uplift the socio-economic status of the women in rural areas of Assam.

Some structural factors like age, caste, class, marital status, type of family etc. affect low participation of women in MNREGS in the three villages. In Assam there are certain stereotypes about women that they are too weak to work and that working outside home lowers the social status of their families. It is the culture and society where doing menial work in public by women is not considered respectable. But most of the respondents informed that though they were willing to work, they did not get job under the scheme. In certain cases it was also found that although the names of women members were there on the job cards, but it was their husbands who actually worked. The male members are preferred by the Gaon Panchayat leaders keeping in mind their physical strength as required for the jobs. It was seen that the MNREGS was not implemented properly in the three villages. Due to lack of work opportunity the participation of women in MNREGS in the three villages was not high. It is important to note that MNREGS is still in its infancy and it will take years to put in place the tools and instruments needed to actualize the right to employment through the scheme. In Assam, the success of the MNREGS, however, will depend on people's realization and awareness of the Act as a right.

Political participation is no doubt an important indicator affecting women's empowerment and status in the villages. Women members of Panchayat are gradually learning to adjust to the new political conditions. Almost all of the respondents who have so far participated in one or other forms of political activities said that they have noticed a gradual change in their status in society.

Most of the women from the villages generally do not check-up their health regularly. They used to consult doctor if any member of their family is ill. Most of the households use the public medical sector for treatment and they are generally satisfied with the health care they receive from the public health centres. However, the private medical sector is used for serious cases.

The women of the villages play a vital role in maintaining their family. They are not confined and engaged only in domestic household activities but engaged almost like men in outdoor activities also as subsistence farmers, home-based micro-entrepreneurs, or low-paid seasonal labourers. In agriculture, they play a major hand, starting from preparing the field for cultivation to post-harvest activities. Their direct and indirect contribution at the farm and home level along with livestock management operation has not only help to save their assets but also led to increase the family income. The respondents engaged in different works on paddy field and also in the household. But, their works has not been recognized yet in their family as well as in the community. Their works has been overlooked and called as supplementary or supporting.

Electronic and visual media are more effective and popular among the village women than the print media. It is because the illiterate women can understand the news or any other discussion on TV and radio but they cannot access to newspaper. The respondents more or less, access different media of communication like newspaper, magazines, radio, TV etc. They have acquired information regarding rural development programmes from the media. It is seen in the three villages that through different media and channels the rural women get different knowledge about outside the village.

Comparatively, the respondents of Charigaon had high level of participation in the development aspects than the other two villages respondents. It is due to their family background, economic status and most importantly education. The educated women participated in political, educational and health programmes effectively. They also tried to mobilize the other rural women to participate in various Rural Development programmes. Lack of awareness has been one of the major obstacles in securing women's participation in the villages. Education and training are essential components of any strategy to improve women's participation in it. In comparison to

the three types of respondents of the study, the SHGs members were found more active participant in different aspects of Rural Development. It is because; most of them had education up to high school. After getting training under DRDA, NGOs or any other agency they became active and interested to develop their own personality, speaking ability in the society and to be economically independent. In all of the development aspects like political, health, education and agriculture, their participation was quite high than the other two types of women respondents. Thus, this study concludes that participation of women in different Rural Development programmes not only increases income of the family but also improves the decision-making capabilities that led to overall empowerment of women.

In conclusion, it can be suggests that, in order to exercise any kind of women's participation, there needs to understand among all stakeholders, all people who are targeted. Reasons and benefits of women's participation have to be clearly addressed and understood by the community people. Without women's participation and contribution the real sense of development in any sector is not possible.