

Mapping Local Governance and Village-Level Institutions for Women's Empowerment: Evidence from Majuli District of Assam

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Abstract:

This study maps local governance models and village-level institutions in Majuli District, Assam, and evaluates their potential contributions to women's empowerment. Employing an empirical and analytical methodology, the research examines ten institutions, including constitutional bodies, autonomous councils, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, and Panchayati Raj Institutions. The results indicate a diverse institutional ecosystem with considerable governance capacity. However, only a minority of institutions identify women's empowerment as an explicit organisational priority, and leadership positions remain predominantly occupied by men. Nevertheless, all institutions indicated a willingness to support women's empowerment if sufficient financial, technical, and administrative resources are provided.

Keywords: Local Governance, Women's Empowerment, Village-Level Institutions, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Majuli District.

Introduction:

Real social change initiates at the grassroots level, where prevailing power dynamics intersect with the daily experiences of individuals. Women's empowerment is among such initiatives that require grassroots interventions. Empowerment is not a singular outcome that can be conferred upon individuals solely through policy measures; rather, it is a continuous process that involves enhancing individuals' capacity to make decisions and exercise control over various aspects of their lives. Against the backdrop of the global emphasis on sustainable development and equitable societal progress, women's empowerment has emerged as a central element of the international agenda deemed essential (United Nations, 2015). Women's empowerment has been understood in a number of yet complementary academic ways. Kabeer (1999)

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defines it in terms of three closely linked aspects—resources, agency, and achievements emphasising the ability to make strategic choices about one's life. Sen's (1999) capability approach does the same by seeing empowerment as an expansion of real freedoms and capabilities rather than just as an improvement in economic terms. Building on these views, Rowlands (1997) understands empowerment in terms of different kinds of power: power within, power to, power with, and power over. Batliwala (1994) maintains that true empowerment involves a transformation of the unequal social and institutional power relations, going beyond simple participation in programmes. From an institutional point of view, Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) claim that empowerment depends on the interaction between an individual's agency and the opportunity structures set up by institutions.

In rural settings, women's empowerment proceeds along three interconnected dimensions: socio-cultural self-efficacy, economic independence, and political participation. According to the principle of subsidiarity, the doctrine that public matters should be addressed by the lowest competent authority, local governance serves as the fundamental institutional mechanism integrating these three aspects. By decentralising decision-making authority from distant state centres to local communities, local governance offers an accessible forum in which ordinary individuals, particularly women who have historically experienced marginalisation, can directly engage in discussions about their rights, articulate local priorities, challenge entrenched gender norms, and hold public administrative bodies accountable.

To comprehensively understand operational governance, it is imperative to examine the intricate, multi-layered network of both formal and informal institutions constituting the village ecosystem. Formal institutions encompass governmental and constitutional bodies, such as the statutory Gaon Panchayats and Gram Sabhas established under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, alongside specialised regional administrative entities like the Mising Autonomous Council (MAC). These institutions underpin democratic participation, decentralised planning, beneficiary selection, and resource allocation aligned with gender-sensitive budgeting. Complementing these are non-governmental and social organisations that form the organic socio-cultural and economic fabric of community life, including civil and economic groups such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), NGOs, traditional socio-religious organisations like the Neo-Vaishnavite Satras, village Namghars, indigenous customary councils such as the Mising Kebang, and voluntary women's groups like Mahila Samitis. The diverse array of institutions exerts a profound influence on promoting gender equity, enhancing community welfare, mediating conflicts, and nurturing local leadership.

In the Majuli District, a river island characterised by challenging geographic conditions, recurrent seasonal flooding, land erosion, economic isolation, and a heterogeneous population comprising indigenous Mising tribes and non-tribal communities, women's empowerment holds a distinctive position due to the interplay between formal state mechanisms and traditional community structures. Although constitutional quotas and statutory reservations ensure women a stake in political offices and local assemblies, their actual influence over decision-making processes is substantially shaped by their economic independence, cultivated through micro-credit groups, and by prevailing social and cultural norms upheld by religious and customary organisations. By systematically analysing local governance models and village-level institutions, this research aims to provide a practical framework for understanding how formal democratic institutions and informal social structures intersect, conflict, and coalesce to influence women's agency in rural Majuli.

Objectives:

The current research has the following objectives:

1. To map and classify the existing local governance models and village-level institutions operating in Majuli District, Assam, with reference to their organisational structure, leadership, objectives, functions, and jurisdiction.
2. To examine the institutional capacity, functional orientation, and willingness of these local governance institutions to promote women's empowerment at the grassroots level.

Methodology:

The research in this study is based on a scientific, empirical, and analytical approach to identify local governance models and the village-level institutions functioning in Majuli District, Assam, and to evaluate their contribution to women's empowerment. Primary data were gathered through structured interviews that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, together with secondary data sourced from institutional reports, official documents, and pertinent literature. The sample consisted of ten institutions; each being treated as one unit of analysis. In order to ensure that there was geographical coverage of the district, the sample included institutions from the main types of governance such as constitutional bodies, autonomous organisations, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and religious institutions, while development councils and traditional institutions were omitted because of their limited or non-existent operation in the area. The findings were also strengthened through field observations and

assessments of the institutions. The data collected were compiled and analysed using Microsoft Excel and are presented using descriptive statistical methods, such as tables, bar charts, and pie charts.

About the study area:

Majuli is a river island located within the Brahmaputra River in the Upper Assam region of Northeast India. It lies approximately between 26°45' and 27°12' North latitude and 93°39' and 94°35' East longitude, with an average elevation of approximately 85 metres above mean sea level (Government of Assam, n.d.). The island is delineated by the principal channel of the Brahmaputra to the south and by the Kherkutia Suti, an anabranch of the Brahmaputra that joins the main river further downstream via the Subansiri River, to the north. Consequently, Majuli effectively constitutes a substantial mid-channel formation, which is continually shaped and reshaped through the interaction of these two river systems (Sarma & Saikia, 2010). Majuli has held a prominent position in Assamese history since at least the sixteenth century, emerging as a key centre of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement established by the saint-reformer Srimanta Sankardeva and continued by his principal disciple, Madhavdeva (Neog, 1980). The Satras (monastic institutions) established on the island during this period, along with their associated Namghars (prayer halls), have become, and largely continue to be, the principal religious, cultural, and, in earlier centuries, administrative institutions of the island. According to the Census of India 2011, the most recent decennial Census for which comprehensive data is available at the time of writing, the area now constituting Majuli district had a total population of 1,67,304 individuals, including 85,566 males and 81,738 females, distributed across 32,236 households (Directorate of Census Operations, Assam, 2011). The entire population was documented as residing in rural areas, distributed across 243 villages, including 210 cadastral villages and 33 non-cadastral (chaponi) settlements. This represents an unusually high proportion of the latter category, indicative of the district's distinctive pattern of shifting river sandbars (Saikia, 2021).

Discussion and analysis:

a) Mapping of Available Local Institutions:

The research mapped 10 available local institutions in Majuli district to understand their willingness and feasibility in working for women's empowerment. The details have been mentioned below.

Table 1: Details of Institutions Mapped

Sl. No.	Institution	Type (as reported)	Geographic Level	Year of Est.
1	Mising Mimag Kebang (MMK)	Civil Body	District	1993
2	Mishing Autonomous Council (MAC)	Autonomous Council	District	2013
3	All Konch Rajbongshi Student Union (AKRSU)	Civil Body	District	1995
4	Konch Rajbonsi Development Council	Constitutional (Statutory Dev. Council)	District	2021
5	Asom Anusuchit Jati Yuba-Chatra Santha	Civil Body	District	2000
6	Majuli Jila Mahila Samiti	Civil Body (Women's body)	District	1981
7	Krishnaguru Samaj Majuli Chakra	Civil Body (Faith-based)	District	1987
8	Warriors	NGO	State	2020
9	Phooloni Gaon Panchayat	Constitutional (PRI)	Village	1992
10	SeSTA (Seven Sisters Development Assistance)	NGO	Block	2011

Source: Field Work.

The table indicates that a total of ten institutions responded. Collectively, they represent a notably diverse range of governance and civil society actors operating within Majuli, including formal statutory bodies, ethnic and community civil society organisations, a dedicated women's organisation, a faith-based organisation, and two non-governmental organisations.

b) Leadership of the mapped Institutions:

The gender composition of leadership within these institutions has been a significant subject of analytical focus. Table 2, provided below, may be referenced here for further discussion.

Table 2: Gender of top leadership

Institution	Top leader	Gender
MMK	Arun Gam, President	Male
MAC	Troilokya Pamegam, Chairman	Male
AKRSU	Boloram Barman	Male
Konch Rajbonshi Development Council	Pranab Narayan Dev, Chairman	Male
Asom Anusuchit Jati Yuba-Chatra Santha	Nipen Das, President	Male
Majuli Jila Mahila Samiti	Subhadra Saikia Bora, President	Female
Krishnaguru Samaj Majuli Chakra	Guru Premananda Goswami	Male
Warriors	Utpal Shivam, Chairman	Male
Phooloni Gaon Panchayat	Bobita Narah Mili, President	Female
SeSTA	Pradyut Bhattacharjee, Executive Director	Male

Source: Field Work

Only 2 of the 10 institutions (20%) are headed by a woman: the Mahila Samiti (a women's institution by design) and the Gaon Panchayat (likely a reserved/elected woman president under Panchayati Raj reservation norms). None of the ethnic/community civil bodies, the faith-based institution, the autonomous council, or any NGO reported a woman in the top leadership position, even though two of those NGOs (Warriors, SeSTA) have women's empowerment as a stated thematic focus.

c) Objectives of the Institutions:

Coding the open-ended objective statements inductively produced four thematic clusters mentioned in Table 3.

Table 3: Objectives of the Institutions

Theme	Institutions	n
Ethnic/community identity and socio-economic upliftment	MMK, AKRSU, Konch Rajbonshi Development Council, Asom Anusuchit Jati Yuba-Chatra Santha, MAC	5
Explicit women-centred objectives	Majuli Jila Mahila Samiti, Warriors, SeSTA ("Mahila Kishans")	3
General rural/village development (statutory mandate)	Phooloni Gaon Panchayat	1
Spiritual/religious and social-harmony objectives	Krishnaguru Samaj Majuli Chakra	1

Source: Field Work

Table 3 illustrates that MMK articulates its objective as "parliamentary democratic movements for Misings"; AKRSU emphasises the "protection of the identity of Konch Rajbongshi and the demand for ST status"; whereas the Mahila Samiti explicitly states "overall upliftment of women in Majuli" and Warriors prioritises "women's empowerment" and "security of women" as its primary objectives. So it is evident that only 3 of 10 institutions (30%) have women's empowerment as an explicit, named, primary objective. For the remaining 7, it is at best implicit, something that might follow from broader community-development, identity, or spiritual objectives, but is not written into the institution's core purpose. This gap between general purpose community mandates and women-specific mandates is one of the more important structural findings for the project's argument.

d) Functions of the Institution

The process of coding the "core functions" responses led to the identification of the following recurring functional categories, noting that an institution may be classified under more than one category.

Table 4: Functions of the institution

Functional theme	Institutions	n
Skill development / livelihood training	MMK, MAC, Krishnaguru Samaj (handloom), Warriors, SeSTA	5
Government scheme facilitation / liaison	Konch Rajbonshi Dev. Council, AKRSU, Phooloni GP, SeSTA	4
Awareness-raising and education/literacy campaigns	MMK, Asom Anusuchit Jati Yuba-Chatra Santha, Majuli Jila Mahila Samiti	3
Cultural preservation / identity events	AKRSU, Konch Rajbonshi Dev. Council, Majuli Jila Mahila Samiti	3
Legal aid / mediation / conflict resolution	MMK, Warriors	2
Statutory/administrative functions under law	Phooloni Gaon Panchayat (73rd Amendment functions)	1
Religious/spiritual instruction	Krishnaguru Samaj Majuli Chakra	1

Source: Fieldwork

The most prevalent function across the sample is skill and livelihood training, accounting for fifty per cent of the institutions, followed by serving as intermediaries between communities and government schemes. Functions directly related to women's protection or rights, such as legal aid and mediation, are present in only two institutions (MMK and Warriors). For MMK, these functions are considered general community roles rather than women-specific initiatives. This observation indicates that the daily operations of most institutions primarily serve their broader community mandate. Any benefits specifically targeted at women are incidental rather than intentionally designed outcomes.

e) Willingness for Functioning in the Women's Empowerment Sector:

This inquiry received responses from all ten institutions, revealing a notable outcome: each institution (10/10) demonstrated a willingness to enhance its emphasis on women's empowerment. Nevertheless, this willingness was invariably expressed conditionally, contingent upon the external support deemed necessary, rather than as an unconditional pledge.

Table 5: Willingness to work for women's empowerment sector

Condition attached to willingness	Institutions mentioning it	n / 10
Financial support / funding / govt. schemes	MMK, MAC, Konch Rajbonshi Dev. Council, Krishnaguru Samaj, Warriors, Phooloni GP, SeSTA, Yuba-Chatra Santha, Mahila Samiti	9
Government/district administration collaboration	MAC, AKRSU, Yuba-Chatra Santha, Warriors, SeSTA	5
Skilled staff / training / technical experts	MMK, Krishnaguru Samaj, SeSTA	3
Community/public cooperation	Phooloni GP, Mahila Samiti	2

Source: Fieldwork

Table 5 demonstrates that willingness is not the primary limitation within the institutional framework of Majuli; rather, resource availability constitutes the key constraint. This constitutes a critical and cite-worthy finding for the project: all surveyed institutions express their willingness to intensify efforts towards women's empowerment; however, 90% explicitly identify financial support as an essential prerequisite. For the purposes of this report, it is inferred that the most effective policy instrument for activating this sector is targeted funding and scheme linkage, rather than persuasion or awareness-raising among institutions.

Key Findings:

The analysis of the institutions identified indicates several significant findings concerning the state of local governance institutions and their potential role in empowering women in Majuli District, Assam.

1. Majuli sustains a multifaceted institutional ecosystem with considerable governance capacity. The study identified ten operational entities, encompassing constitutional bodies, autonomous councils, civil society organisations, ethnic groups, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, and Panchayati Raj Institutions. This diversity signifies that women's empowerment can be promoted through various governance channels, rather than solely relying on official state institutions.

2. Leadership within local institutions continues to be predominantly male. Out of the ten institutions surveyed, which constitute eighty per cent, eight are under male management, whereas only two, representing twenty per cent, are led by females. These two female-led institutions comprise a women's organisation and a Gram Panchayat led by an elected female representative. This persistent male dominance in leadership roles highlights that decision-making authority concerning community development and women's issues predominantly remains in the hands of men.
3. In most organisations, the empowerment of women is not regarded as a primary institutional priority. Among these entities, only three (30 per cent) explicitly declare that women's empowerment constitutes one of their principal organisational objectives. The remaining organisations primarily focus on ethnic identity, community development, cultural preservation, socio-economic progress, or religious and spiritual endeavours. This outcome highlights a structural disparity between the numerous grassroots institutions and their limited institutional commitment to gender-focused development.
4. The functions of institutions are principally directed towards serving the community rather than focusing specifically on gender issues. The most prevalent activities undertaken by the surveyed institutions include promoting livelihoods, offering skill development programs, facilitating access to government welfare schemes, raising awareness, and preserving cultural identity. Functions explicitly related to women's rights, legal assistance, protection, or gender justice are comparatively limited and are provided by only a small subset of organisations. As a result, women predominantly benefit indirectly from general development initiatives rather than from programmes explicitly aimed at addressing gender inequalities.
5. The local institutions demonstrate a commendable willingness to participate in women's empowerment initiatives. All ten surveyed institutions affirmed their commitment to enhance their engagement in such activities. This indicates that institutional resistance is not a significant obstacle to advancing gender-inclusive governance within the region.
6. The primary obstacle to institutional engagement is the deficiency of resources. Although all institutions expressed a willingness to support women's empowerment, the majority associated this willingness with the availability of adequate financial assistance, government programmes, inter-institutional cooperation, technical expertise, and a supply of appropriately trained personnel. Nearly ninety per cent of the institutions considered financial assistance to be the most critical prerequisite for expanding women-focused interventions. This indicates that the fundamental challenge lies in institutional capacity rather than in the intentions of the institutions.

7. There exists considerable policy potential in augmenting institutional capacity. The findings suggest that existing village-level institutions already hold substantial community legitimacy and are well-established throughout Majuli. Rather than creating new organisations, public policy could achieve greater effectiveness by enhancing the financial, technical, and administrative capabilities of these current institutions and integrating them more systematically into women's empowerment programmes.
8. The study underscores the significance of collaborative grassroots governance. Attaining women's empowerment in Majuli cannot be achieved solely through the Panchayati Raj Institutions or specialised women's organisations. The presence of ethnic organisations, autonomous councils, faith-based institutions, NGOs, and civil society organisations indicates that a multi-institutional and cooperative approach to governance is more appropriate for addressing the complex social, economic, and cultural facets of women's empowerment in the region.

Conclusion:

This study aims to chart the local governance frameworks and village institutions operating within Majuli district, as well as to systematically evaluate their contributions to women's empowerment. The empirical findings reveal a genuinely pluralistic institutional landscape, encompassing statutory Panchayati Raj bodies, an autonomous tribal council, ethnic and community civil society organisations, a dedicated women's institution, a faith-based organisation, and development NGOs. However, the explicit institutional mandate for women's empowerment and female leadership within these entities remain exceptional rather than normative. Concurrently, the study offers cautious optimism: there exists a universal willingness within the sample to engage in women's empowerment initiatives, with the primary constraints being financial and resource-related rather than attitudinal or institutional readiness. Attaining progress in these areas would align Majuli's institutional environment more closely with the broader global and national commitments to women's empowerment as an ongoing, agency-driven process. Furthermore, this model could serve as a replicable blueprint for other similarly pluralistic and geographically vulnerable districts in Northeast India.

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