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Research Paper

Political Participation of Women with Special Reference to Assam

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ABSTRACT

The participation of women in politics is a crucial element of a functioning democracy and effective governance. A democracy cannot thrive without the complete engagement of women. It is an undeniable truth that advancements in democracy and the empowerment of women are interconnected, and no nation can progress if half of its population is excluded. Women from Assam have participated in politics, not only during the struggle for independence but also by organising at the community level in their areas, yet they remain significantly less represented in formal power structures than in the wider society. Despite these developments, the barriers to women's participation in politics and their influence within it continue to be reinforced by deeply- rooted patriarchy, socio- cultural stigmas, economic pressures, and biases in the media. This paper aims to explore the political engagement of women in the context of Assam.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political participation can be characterised in several ways. It encompasses not only the act of voting but also includes sharing power, making decisions collaboratively, and participating in policy- making at all levels of governance. The Indian Constitution guarantees equal political opportunities for both men and women. Women, being equal citizens, should have an equal role alongside men in the decision-making processes. The level of political participation, representation, and influence in public decision-making reflects the status of women in society. It has been observed that, in many regions of the world, women's political involvement as elected representatives in legislative bodies is quite limited. In India, where women constitute half of the population, their overall percentage of political representation and involvement in decision-making bodies remains very low. Although a few women with strong political backgrounds hold high-ranking executive and political positions

in decision-making bodies, this does not indicate the true political, social, or economic empowerment of women. Women's participation and representation in politics are essential for a thriving democracy, as these aspects are considered fundamental to its success.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of political participation of women is an important concern that requires an in-depth evaluation of existing studies and research:

- In his article 'Political Participation of Women of Assam with Special Reference to Nalbari District', Dr Dhaneswar Baishya highlights that women's involvement in politics is remarkably significant. Based on previous election data, the percentage of women voters is nearly equal to that of men voters. Conversely, women represent a considerably smaller fraction of candidates in

electoral politics compared to men. The proportion of women elected to parliament and the state legislative assembly in Assam is alarmingly low, at less than 10 percent.

- Parismita Borah, in her article 'Political Participation of Women in North-East India with Special Reference to Assam', notes that while the involvement of women in politics is increasing, it remains below a satisfactory level. There are numerous challenges hindering women's political engagement.
- According to Dr Biswabijoy Bhattacharjee in his article 'Political Participation and Women: A Study of Assam', women's participation in Assam's politics is unsatisfactory when compared to that of men. They remain largely excluded from the processes of policy-making and decision-making in Assam. He recommends that elected women from each district in Assam should form a group and regularly engage in meetings and discussions to devise strategies for enhancing female participation and addressing male dominance in politics.
- In the work "Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj, Hota (2020) argues that the actual participation of women in decision-making bodies is extremely limited. Nevertheless, the 2019 Parliamentary election in India witnessed a record number of 783 women contesting, of whom 78, approximately 14%, succeeded in winning their elections. The number of elected women remains significantly lower compared to that of men.
- Pathak (2008), in his book "Assamese Women in Indian Independence Movement", asserts that women in Assam have played an important role in socio-political movements, starting from the Freedom movement to the Assam movement, yet none of these women have attained positions within decision-making bodies. Women in Assam continue to experience marginalisation in decision-making processes, and their presence and participation in formal electoral politics are extremely limited.

3. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To analyse Assam's women representation in the Lok Sabha and the State Assembly.
- ◆ To analyse the present political status of Assamese women.
- ◆ To highlight the causes of the lower participation of women in active politics.
- ◆ To measure the scope for enhancing Women's Political Empowerment.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data's collected for this study are based on secondary sources like books, articles, the internet, newspapers, etc. The method adopted for this study is analytical as well as descriptive.

5. DISCUSSION & RESULTS

The women of Assam boast a glorious history dating back to ancient times. However, they have struggled to attain significant positions in decision-making and leadership roles within the political landscape. Similar to other regions in India, the political involvement of women in Assam started on a small scale during the freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921 inspired Assamese women to actively participate in the fight for independence, leading them to break societal constraints and

stand with the men in the same line. Their engagement in activities like picketing, public rallies, and meetings became increasingly common during the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. The involvement of women in Assam during the Civil Disobedience Movement was so massive that fifteen women sacrificed their lives for India's freedom.

Women in Assam began to unite and formed various organisations. The first women's organisation, 'Asom Mahila Samity,' was founded in 1926 by Chandra Prabha Saikiani. This organisation played a crucial role in promoting women's education, adult education for women, mother and child welfare, establishing Khadi and village industries, opposing child marriages, and fighting against untouchability. In 1940, the women's wing of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was established, specialising in organising and training women. Even after independence, women continued to be actively involved in numerous social movements in Assam. These included the State Language Movement in 1960, the Refinery Movement in 1967, the Medium Movement in 1972, and the Assam Movement on the foreigner's issue from 1975 to 1985. Assamese women engaged freely in these social and political movements, and during the Assam Movement, millions of them came out on the streets, participating in various activities such as picketing, breaking curfews, conducting blackouts, hunger strikes, and demonstrating.

Present Status of Women as a Voter

The political representation of women is primarily reflected in their involvement as voters and candidates in various elections for the Lok Sabha and State assemblies. Women constituted a significant portion (approximately 40%) of the overall electorate. In the most recent Lok Sabha election (2024), out of 2,45,72,144 registered voters in Assam, there were 1,23,39,241 women voters and 1,23,25,293 male voters. During the first two elections in 1952 and 1957, the turnout of women voters across India was notably low in comparison to their male counterparts. In the 1952 Lok Sabha election, the total voting percentage was 60.55%, with men voting at 53.0% and women voting at only 37.0%. In the 1957 elections, out of a combined voting percentage of 63.7% for both males and females, men accounted for 56.0% while women constituted 39.6%. Remarkably, the percentage of women voters in the 18th Lok Sabha election (2024) increased to 47.1%, compared to 43.1% in 2019.

In terms of women's roles as voters in assembly elections, there has also been an upward trend. According to the Chief Election Commission office of Assam, a total of 23,374,087 individuals were eligible to vote in the Assam assembly election. Among these, 11,823,286 were male voters, and 11,550,403 were female voters, indicating a growth in the number of female voters.

Present Status of Women as Candidates in the Assam State Assembly

The participation of women in Assam's electoral politics began before independence. In 1924, a resolution was passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly granting women the right to vote

and to contest in elections. During the legislative elections of 1937, Miss Mavis Dunn was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly from Shillong, and she was the first woman of Assam to be elected to the provincial legislative assembly. After independence, the participation of women in electoral politics as both voters and candidates has gradually increased.

Assam comprises 126 constituencies, yet the representation of women in the State Legislative Assembly has not improved significantly. In the 1951-52 Assam Legislative Assembly elections, there was only one female candidate, resulting in a victory percentage of merely 0.93%, which increased to 11.90% by 2011. Late Usha Barthakur was the first woman MLA of Assam, elected from the Samaguri Constituency in the Nagaon district during the first elections of 1952. The 13th assembly elections in 2011 saw the highest number of women elected since independence, with 15 out of 85 female candidates among 981 total candidates. The highest participation of female candidates occurred in 2016, showing a dramatic increase from just 1 in 1951 to 91 in that year. Unfortunately, only 8 women (6.35%) out of those 91 were successful in the elections. In that election cycle, there were a total of 1190 candidates, with 1099 (92.35%) being male and only 91 female candidates, representing 7.65%. After 1951, the proportion of female representatives rose to 7.02%, but saw a sudden decline to 0.79% in the subsequent 1978 elections. In 1991, there were 1657 candidates in total, but only 50 women contested, with just 5 managing to secure a seat.

In the most recent election held in 2021, there were 946 candidates overall, out of which 870 were male and only 76 women presented their candidature. It is both shocking and unfortunate that despite numerous government initiatives aimed at women's empowerment, the number of elected female members has not seen an increase. Rather, the levels of women's participation and representation have decreased in both general and assembly elections.

Present Status of Women as Candidates in the General Election

The overall participation of women in the general election is not so impressive. Despite a proud historical background, the status of women in Assam is particularly poor regarding their roles in decision-making bodies. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha seats and 7 Rajya Sabha seats. Since its first general elections, women from Assam have struggled to gain adequate representation in both houses of Parliament. They continue to fall behind their male counterparts.

In the 2014 general election, there were merely 19 female candidates from Assam, which marked the highest participation of women since 1952. Consequently, the women's reservation bill was introduced; however, the increased participation was not noticed, and in fact, it declined. In the 2024 General Election, only 12 women have put forth their candidacies, and out of these 12, only one candidate can win a seat. From the first election of 1951-52 to the 2024 elections, a total of 106 women candidates from Assam have contested, but only 17 have succeeded in becoming representatives.

The participation of women in the Rajya Sabha remains extremely low. Since the beginning of these elections, very few women have had the chance to represent in the Rajya Sabha. In the 1994 and 1996 elections, there was only one female member in the Rajya Sabha. Currently, there are no female representatives in the Rajya Sabha. This analysis illustrates that, even though women hold esteemed positions in Assamese households and society, they remain behind men in the political sphere. It is important to note that both political parties and the common people are not supportive of increasing women's representation in power.

Present Status of Women as Candidates in Local Bodies:

In grassroots politics, the participation of women has grown significantly since the 1990s. The Assam Panchayat Act of 1986 established a thirty per cent reservation for women in Gaon Panchayat. Panchayat elections were conducted in 1992 in accordance with the Panchayat Act of 1986. A new Panchayat Act was enacted in 1994 following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandated one-third reservation across all three levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Consequently, thousands of women gained the chance to engage in PRI politics. The reservation percentage has now risen to fifty per cent, leading to greater female participation in local governance.

CHALLENGES

Women's political participation began during the freedom struggle movement. During this period, Assamese women actively participated, came out of household affairs and started the political journey in the mid-19th century. However, they continue to be treated as second-class citizens both in the country and in their states.

Patriarchal society

India, as well as Assam, has deep-rooted patriarchal values, where women often face societal pressures to conform to traditional roles in homemaking and caregiving, limiting their participation in public spheres, including politics.

Violence and Intimidation

Violence and intimidation present significant barriers to women's political engagement. Those who participate in political activities frequently face threats, harassment, and, in some instances, physical violence. This hostile environment can deter many women from pursuing political careers.

Party Politics

Despite the promotion of gender equality, many political parties are reluctant to nominate women candidates. Party leaders often hesitate due to concerns about losing seats, reflecting a lack of confidence in the abilities of female candidates.

Economic Factors

The socio-economic status of women is a crucial element influencing their participation and representation in politics. Since many women lack financial stability, even if they are

interested in politics, they often cannot pursue it due to the high costs associated with campaigning.

MEASURES

To uplift the role of women in decision making process, some measures should be implemented:

Educational Initiatives

Education plays a key role in addressing stereotypes and fostering a culture of gender equality. Introducing gender-sensitive curricula and awareness programs in schools can assist in changing societal views on women's leadership roles.

Role of Civil Society and NGOs

Civil society organisations and NGOs are essential in advocating for women's rights and promoting their political participation. They can offer training programs, create support networks, and push for policy reforms.

Grassroots initiatives and community engagement:

Grassroots efforts have historically been crucial in driving social and political change. Encouraging women's involvement in local community projects and fostering partnerships between civil society organisations and local communities can significantly contribute to developing strong support for gender-inclusive policies.

CONCLUSION

The participation of women in politics is expected to transform the political landscape. Politics influences every aspect of our lives, including the economy, education, healthcare, and both internal and external security. Without the inclusion of women in the politics of decision-making, there will be polarisation of one section, and a proper balance will not be there. Therefore, it is crucial to create opportunities for women in the decision-making sphere at every level to enable their empowerment. Enhancing women's presence in politics is vital for fostering a more democratic Assam. By increasing the representation of women in political roles, we can ensure that policies and decisions reflect a diversity of perspectives and promote inclusivity, leading to a fairer and more equitable society. Moreover, when women occupy positions of power, it motivates the younger generation of girls, helping them to realise they, too, can overcome obstacles and chase their ambitions. It conveys a strong message that gender should not restrict one's dreams or capabilities. To secure women's rightful status in society and to cultivate a genuine and sustainable democracy, their involvement in politics is essential.

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