



PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS OF ASSAM UPTO 2014: AN ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

Munin Borah

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Nowgong Girls` College, Nagaon, Assam

Introduction : A nation is marked as progressive and successful if it is able to provide equal status to all of its citizens regardless of their class, caste, sex etc. Status of women in a society is the indicator of the progress of the society. Though every country accepts the importance of women for the progress of society and emphasizes on gender equality but on the other hand in every society women are regarded as weak and vulnerable. Since the ancient period it is known that politics is generally dominated by men folk and even in the matriarchal societies women could hardly play a dominant role in the decision making process. But it does not mean that they do not have interest in it. The basic fact is that the patriarchal society does not favour their participation and assigned entire house hold works to them. Therefore, there needs effective and meaningful involvement of women in decision making is absolutely essential.

In Indian society women are often described from two sharply contradictory aspects. On the one hand, they are regarded as the mother Goddess, provider of food and destroyer of evil, on the other hand they are forced to confine themselves only with domestic services free of cost with limited functions. Even the great epics Ramayana also showed a dark picture of women and treated them inferior to their husbands. Customs like Sati, dowry also make them inferiors. The situation improved a little during the British period.

Indian constitution has to ensure greater participation of people in its politics guaranteeing to its citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality of status and of opportunity and Fraternity assuring dignity of the individual and unity and integrity of the Nation. In addition to these the fundamental rights ensure the people's right to participate in its politics without any distinctions. It further strengthens through Articles 325 and 326 of the political and equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. Hence, it is clear that Indian constitution provides a greater opportunity to participate in its political as well as socioeconomic sphere, it does not matter whatever his or her sex is.

In the context of Assam, despite having a pride history they are still fighting for their survival and participation level in the main stream politics is very low. But as compared to its neighbouring states, Assam is still in good position in terms of women representations. As a voter Assamese women removed their traditional customs and show a remarkable progress in the recent years.

Objectives of the Paper : The main objectives of the study are :

- i) To analyse the political status of Assamese women.
- ii) To examine the role of women in politics of Assam and also in national level.
- iii) To study the impact of Panchayati Raj on women empowerment in Assam.
- iv) To compare male and female participation.
- v) To highlight the causes and barriers that limit women's political participation with some measures.

Methodology :

The study is based on analytical method with some statistical data. Books, journals, articles, magazines, newspapers and websites are used.

Political Participation:

The political awareness of people firstly originated in Greece. But in modern times representative democracy existed in many countries of the world irrespective of sex. In a democratic country political participation includes the activities designed to influence the decision of government through persuasion to attain political goals. In India after independence parliamentary democracy was established and participation of women became very strong through the institution of Panchayati Raj.

Review of Relevant works:

The participation of women in the decision making process initially began with the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-08). Joining of Gandhi in Indian National Congress resulted in greater women participation. Thousands of women joined in the salt Satyagraha, 3 which is "generally remembered as the first time 'masses of Indian women' got involved in the struggle for Independence" (Kumar 1995, P. 78). Nehru in his book "The Discovery of India" wrote that when all the leaders were in jail, women came forward and took charge of the struggle and displayed an unimaginable state of courage and daring. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Aruna Asraf Ali were played a decisive role in the freedom struggle. Assamese women were not also far behind than their counterpart. Thousands of Assamese women joined the freedom struggle actively. Leaders like Kanaklata, Bhogeshwari Phukanani were shot dead by the British. However their participation in active politics is not so impressive. Only the higher caste women were involved in the politics.

Participation of women in General Election as a whole :

The participation of women in not so impressive in the general election as a whole. In the first ever general election their strength was only 23 in the House. Women's representation in the 6 th Lok Sabha was only 18. The subsequent elections, on the whole witnessed an upward trend except 1989 election. But from 1991 election, the number of women MPs steadily rose to touch 44 in 1998 election. However, in 2014 it crossed its highest level. The following table shows the participation of women in the part general elections.

Table : 1

| SL No | Year of Election | Total Seats | Female | Male |
|-------|------------------|-------------|--------|------|
| 1 | 1952 | 494 | 23 | 471 |
| 2 | 1957 | 494 | 24 | 470 |
| 3 | 1962 | 494 | 37 | 457 |
| 4 | 1967 | 520 | 32 | 488 |
| 5 | 1971 | 520 | 26 | 494 |

| | | | | |
|----|------|-----|----|-----|
| 6 | 1977 | 542 | 18 | 524 |
| 7 | 1980 | 542 | 32 | 510 |
| 8 | 1984 | 542 | 46 | 496 |
| 9 | 1989 | 543 | 28 | 515 |
| 10 | 1991 | 543 | 39 | 504 |
| 11 | 1996 | 543 | 40 | 503 |
| 12 | 1998 | 543 | 44 | 499 |
| 13 | 1999 | 543 | 47 | 496 |
| 14 | 2004 | 543 | 45 | 599 |
| 15 | 2009 | 543 | 59 | 484 |
| 16 | 2014 | 543 | 61 | 482 |

Participation of Assamese Women in National Level :

Despite having a glorious history the status of women in Assam is the worst in terms of their position in decision making bodies. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha seats and 7 for the Rajya Sabha. Since its first general election women from Assam do not get proper representation in the both houses of the parliament. They are still lagging behind the male counterpart. The following statistics of Lok Sabha election support the pathetic position of women of Assam in national level politics.

Table: 2

| Sl No | Year of Election | Contesting Candidate (Female) | Total Seats won by (Female) |
|-------|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 1952 | 02 | 01 |
| 2 | 1957 | 02 | 02 |
| 3 | 1962 | 03 | 02 |
| 4 | 1967 | 02 | 01 |
| 5 | 1971 | 03 | 01 |
| 6 | 1977 | 03 | 02 |
| 7 | 1980 | 02 | 0 |
| 8 | 1984 | 0 | 0 |
| 9 | 1989 | 0 | 0 |
| 10 | 1991 | 07 | 0 |
| 11 | 1996 | 09 | 01 |
| 12 | 1999 | 09 | 02 |
| 13 | 2004 | 06 | 0 |
| 14 | 2009 | 11 | 02 |
| 15 | 2014 | 16 | 02 |

Source: www.ecigov.in

In the Lok Sabha election of 1977 out of 14 seats only 3 female candidates were contested and 2 managed to win but in the election of 1980 the number is reduced to 2 and none were elected. Interestingly no female candidates were contested in the election of 1984 and 1989. However, the number is increasing day by day and reached to 7 in the 1991 election (but on one got elected) and 9 in the election of 1996 where one candidate was managed to win.

In the election of 1999 out of 115 candidates, there were only 9 female candidates contested and only 2 managed to win. Again in the election of 2004 out of 116 candidates, only 6 female candidates contested but none could win. The position is little bit improved in the 2009 election, where out of 169 candidates, eleven female forwarded their candidature and 2 managed to win the election.

15th Lok Sabha Election witnessed a major turn out of women voter in Assam politics. Which was 66.80%. The constituency like Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Borpheta the turnout was crossed 70%. It was a good sign in Assam politics as well as for the women of Assam. In these constituency, where women are not allowed to get out from their home, but

surprisingly now women get out from their home and caste their votes. It indicates that now women get equal status in terms of men and conscious about their rights. Not only these constituencies but the turnout was also impressive in other constituency too. Table 1.3 showed the turn of women voters in Assam.

Table : 3

Percentage of women voters in 15th Lok Sabha Election (2009)

| Constituency | Turnout |
|---------------------|---------|
| Karimganj | 57.56 |
| Silchar | 65.61 |
| Autonomous District | 63.00 |
| Dhubri | 75.03 |
| Kokrajhar | 70.10 |
| Barpeta | 71.39 |
| Guwahati | 61.99 |
| Mangaldoi | 66.30 |
| Tezpur | 68.37 |
| Nowgong | 69.66 |
| Kaliabor | 68.78 |
| Jorhat | 61.00 |
| Dibrugarh | 64.24 |
| Lakhimpur | 67.49 |

Average 66.80 Source : CEO Assam.

Participation in Rajya Sabha:

The participation of women in Rajya Sabha is also very minimal. Since its first elections only a few get the opportunity to represent in the Rajya Sabha. In the elections of 1994 and 1996 there was only 1 female member in the Rajya Sabha. In the present Rajya Sabha there is only 1 female representative Thus the above discussion reflects that though they have pride of place in Assamese households and society, women in this state lag behind the men in the political area. It is worth mentioning here that, not only the political parties but also the common people are not in favour to bring women in power.

Participation of women in Legislative Assembly of the State :

Assam has 126 constituencies but the participation of women in the State Legislative Assembly is not improved. However a few numbers of women have got ministerial portfolio in the government of Assam. During the period of 1952 and 1985 the number of contests women candidates ranged between 4 and 20.

In terms of contesting candidates the number was highest (20) in the election of 1978, but only one candidate was managed to win. During the period of 1972 and 1978 the percentage of women legislators were 7.02 and 0.79 respectively.

The following table shows the position of women in Assam Legislative Assembly :

Table: 4

| SL NO | Year | Total Seats | Male | Female |
|-------|-----------|-------------|------|--------|
| 1 | 1983-1985 | 110 | 108 | 2 |
| 2 | 1985-1990 | 125 | 121 | 4 |
| 3 | 1991-1996 | 126 | 122 | 4 |
| 4 | 2006-2011 | 126 | 113 | 13 |
| 5 | 2011-2014 | 126 | 112 | 14 |

The above statistics show that there is very wide gap between male and female in electoral politics of Assam.

Comparison between Women and Male participation : The participation of Assamese women in active politics is not so impressive. Mainly the ignorance of the political parties towards them is responsible. Table 1.5 show the figure of women candidate contested in the General Election compare to the male candidate from 1999.

Table : 5

| Year | Male | Female | Won |
|------|------|--------|-----|
| 1999 | 106 | 9 | 2 |
| 2004 | 110 | 6 | 0 |
| 2009 | 147 | 11 | 2 |
| 2014 | 140 | 16 | 2 |

Though they have pride of place in Assamese society, women in this state lag behind the men in the political field.

Participation of women in Panchayati Raj : Decentralization of power is desirable not only for the service it renders to the community, but also for the opportunities it offers to men and women to enjoy an active participation in the governance at the grass root level. Under 73rd and 74th Amendment Act women are provided 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj and Municipal Election for the betterment of women's position at the grass root level. In 2001 Panchayati Raj Election, women participated in this election in a very encouraging way. The percentage of women participation in this election was 33 while all India average is 31.32%

Participation of Assamese women in Panchayat Election held in Dec. 2001 :

Table : 6

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Total member of Gram Panchayat | 24870 |
| Women member of Gram Panchayat | 8210 |
| Total President of Gram Panchayat | 2478 |
| Women President of Gram Panchayat | 821 |
| Total member of Anchalik Panchayat | 2487 |
| Women member of Anchalik Panchayat | 821 |
| Total member of Zilla Parishad | 390 |
| Women member of Zilla Parishad | 129 |

Although women of Assam could not get remarkable success in Parliamentary and Assembly election but as voters their activities are impressive.

Though in 1996 a bill was introduced in parliament for 33% reservation of seat for women both in parliament as well as in Legislative Assembly but it was not become an Act. In 2008 also a bill was introduced in Rajya Sabha for this purpose but it was also not become an Act. But in 2009 33% reservation in local self government was increased to 50%. The union Cabinet in 2011 gave their consent in it. It is a great achievement for the empowerment of rural women. But if it can be applied in National or Assembly election then women empowerment became very impressive. In 16th Lok Sabha Election (2014) only 61 female candidates win instead of 543 seats.

Factors responsible for dismal position of Assamese women in political field:

- i) India is a patriarchal society, so male members did not want to give equal rights to women in political field.
- ii) Lack of political consciousness is also responsible for their sorrowful participation.
- iii) In rural area of Assam women are considered fit for not only household activities but in agricultural fields also.

iv) There is a lack of good will on the part of the high command of various political parties.

v) Narrow mindedness of the society or family members also responsible for not allowing women to take part in active politics.

vi) It is a general view that women are physically and mentally weaker than male. So they cannot take any good or quick decision in times of problem.

Remedies :

To uplift the position of women in decision making process some measures should be taken :

i) Proper political education should be given all women including rural areas, so that they can know about their rights.

ii) Attitudes towards women should be changed.

iii) Motivation is also necessary to uplift the position of women in politics.

iv) Women herself have also a great role to develop their participation in politics.

v) High commands of different parties have to be flexible to provide ticket to female members.

Conclusion :

The above discussion shows that though there are many reservation and constitutional provisions for women, but all these are not sufficient for the empowerment of women. With the changing course of time their condition in political filed have gone under changed. Though their position growing to develop in comparison to few decades ago, but at present their participation in decision making in national as well as state level is not so satisfactory.

References : 1. Baruah, S.L. – Status of Women in Assam.

2. Bajpayee, Ashok and M.S. Verma – Panchayati Raj in India.

3. Roy, Kalpana – Women in Indian Politics.

4. Kaushik, Sushila – Women's Participation in Politics.

5. Altekhar, A.S. – The position of women in Hindu civilization.

6. Website www.ecigov.in website of Assam Legislative Assembly.

7. Tohsin, Fatima Sabidullah – Status of women in Assam. ***

Research Through Innovation