

WOMEN IN NATIONAL POLITICS: A STUDY FROM ASSAM

Anamika Adhikari

Assistant Professor

*Department of Political Science
Majuli College, Majuli, Assam, India
Email- ana.adhikari92@gmail.com*

Bapukan Saikia

Assistant Professor

*Department of Political Science
J.N. College, Boko, Assam, India*

Email- bapukan.pol@gmail.com

Abstract- Women constitute half of the population around the globe but when it comes to representation of women particularly in politics, women lag far behind than that of men. Participation in politics or we can say political participation including men and women is the essence for the success of democracy. India, as the largest democratic nation, should encourage women to increase their political participation be it as the voters or as political representatives. In this paper, we have discussed the role and participation of women in national politics of India in general and women of Assam in particular and has focused on the need for reservation as the only way out to bring more women to politics.

Keywords – Women, Participation, National, Politics, Election

I. INTRODUCTION

When we talk about women in politics, it simply defines political participation of women. Political participation means not only exercising the right to vote, but also active involvement in the decision-making process at all the levels of governance.¹ The International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences defines political participation as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled. It signifies proceedings like voting, seeking information, discussing and proselytizing, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives etc. The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc.

For the success of democracy, participation of the people both men and women are an essential ingredient.² As women comprise about half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in the process.³ Democracy will fail in its objectives if women citizens lack equal opportunity to participate in the governmental decision-making process. There cannot be a real democracy if the voices and issues of women are ignored or even side-lined.⁴

¹ "Political Participation", <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/publication/Chapter3.htm>, Retrieved on 27/4/2021.

² Dr. Biswabijoy Bhattacharjee, "Political Participation and Women: A Study of Assam", *Journal of Xi'an University of Architecture & Technology*, Volume XII, Issue XI, 2020, p. 652.

³ Archana Sharma, "Development and Women in the Functioning of Political Parties: A Case Study of Assam in Global Context", http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_5184.pdf, Retrieved on 26/4/2021.

⁴ Ira Das, "Status of Women: North Eastern Region of India versus India", *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Volume 3, Issue 1, January 2013.

The issue of women's political empowerment came to the forefront of the global debate for women's right at the time of the Fourth-World conference on woman held at Beijing in 1995. It declared "Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is a demand for simple justice and necessary condition for women's interest to be taken into account".⁵

Unfortunately, it is seen that women are not given equal status with men. They face many constraints in participating in the affairs of the government. Politics and political activities are considered as male domain and thus, putting woman aside. People do not want to have women in politics and take politics as masculine domain.⁶

Thus, it is in this context, the objective of this paper is to explore the extent of the participation of the women of Assam in national politics as the representatives in electoral processes. For conducting the present study, data has been collected from secondary sources like articles, research papers, journals, newspapers, etc.

II. WOMEN IN INDIA

As per available data, it is found that women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide, and achieving gender parity in political life is far off.⁷ There are countries with high number of female representatives but with limited powers. According to Tiffany Barnes research paper titled 'Women's Representation in the Argentine National and Subnational Governments' (2018), "the country is still combating problems of gender inequality including domestic violence and sexual harassment. One major reason for the situation is because the women parliamentarians have limited powers and are largely underrepresented". The scenario is pretty similar even in Rwanda which has the highest female representatives. Thus, it can be inferred that there are countries around the world either with less female representatives or countries with more female representatives but with less power.

The Constitution of India gives equal political rights to both men and women, but the representation of women in Parliament as well as in State Legislatures is very less. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. In India, women have held the posts of president and prime minister as well as chief ministers of various states. Indian voters have elected women to numerous state legislative assemblies and national parliament for many decades but as women constitute half of the total population, their representation is miserable. The data as compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the basis of information provided by National Parliaments by 1st February 2019, India stands in 149th position with 12.6% of women in Lower House and 11.5% in Upper House.⁸ In 2020, the World Economic Forum listed India at 122 out of 153 countries when it comes to women's representation in parliament, in their Global Gender Gap Report.⁹ When it comes to a woman in politics and their involvement in real decision-making process, the power still lies with the men.

While national parties like BJP and INC try to sell the idea of reservation on paper, they have hardly managed to stand by their own words when it comes to giving more women an equal chance to participate in elections. Even regional parties that are led by women like TMC, BSP, AIADMK by late Jayalalitha have failed to field more women. Further, talking about the women parliamentarians in the country, the 17th Lok Sabha elections, 2019 recorded a total number of 78 women (14%) out of the 542 seats coming to power, still less than the proposed 33% and out of these women MPs, tragically only 3 out of the 78 women parliamentarians were given Cabinet Ministerial positions. There are 20 women MPs in Rajya Sabha out of total 246 members.

According to NCRB, the number of cases reported on crimes against women have been increasing in the last three years. Uttar Pradesh has again topped the list with 56,011 cases of crime against women. It is followed by Maharashtra with 31,979 cases and West Bengal at 30,002. Interestingly, these are among the States with the greatest

⁵ Mrs. Minal Mhatre, *Women in Electoral Politics: A Case Study of Women's Political Participation in Maharashtra*, Mumbai: Centre for the Study of Society & Secularism, January, 2009.

⁶ Akhlaq Ahmad, Qaisar Khalid Mahmood, Saud, Muhammad & Siti, Mas'udah, "Women in Democracy: The political participation of women", *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, 2019, page 114-122.

⁷ Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation,

⁸ "Women in national parliaments", <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, Retrieved on 1/5/2021

⁹ "International Women's Day: Women MPs push for 33% reservation in Parliament", *Hindustan Times*, 8th March, 2021.

number of women MPs elected. This means that somewhere women MPs still remain invisible or there are underlying interconnected barriers that restrict their growth and visibility in a male dominated environment.¹⁰

III. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN OF ASSAM IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Like all the states of India, in Assam too women are very much marginalized in political participation. Despite having a glorious history of the women of Assam, they could not occupy good position in decision making process and leading role in party politics of the state. Their participation in the national politics i.e. Lok Sabha and Rajyasabha is not satisfactory in compare to male political participation.

History of Assam shows that women's participation in politics in Assam is very old. But women are still not considered as equal as male politicians and are not given the chance to proof their efficiency or capacity. Though the history and literature of Assam give evidence of the relative freeness of Assamese women in the society, but the invasion of the Burmese, influence of Brahminism and the entry of the culture of Bengal compelled the Assamese women to restrict herself in the four walls of the household during the first hundred years of British period. There was no opportunity for them to work for the greater society, nation or even for their own state. Their work was confined only to the welfare of their husbands and offspring. The women who, at one time ruled a kingdom, who participated in the politics and showed their bravery in the battlefield, became a story of yesteryears.¹¹

It was in the year 1921, Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam and delivered lectures in different parts of the province. He also met Assamese women in some special meetings organized for them and asked the women to actively participate in the programs of the freedom movement. Gandhi's visit to Assam had created an enthusiasm among the Assamese women and they came forward to take part in the freedom movement. They had thrown out the 'Purdah System' and stood in the same line with the male.¹²

After independence, the role of women of Assam in electoral politics was not so significant and satisfactory. But in the mass movements, the role of women is found to be the same as in the freedom movement. However, their role in the success of the movement did not bear any fruitful result for the women in respect of electoral politics.¹³ It proved that though in the mass movement the participation of women was considered very essential, they were virtually kept aloof from the electoral politics.

If we look at the women representation from Assam to national politics, we find that few women have elected to parliament i.e., to Loksabha and Rajyasabha. Assam has so far sent only 17 women candidates to the Lok Sabha since the first General Elections in 1952. In 1952, for the first time Bonali Khongman was elected to Loksabha. In the first General Elections of 1952, none of the two contesting candidates won while it was only in 1957 that both the contesting women candidates won the polls while in 1962, two of the three contesting candidates managed to make it to Parliament. In 1967 and 1971, only one candidate could make it in each of the polls. In 1977, two women won the elections. There were no women candidates in 1980, 1984 and 1989 while in 1991, none of seven contesting candidates could manage to win. In 1996 and 1999, nine candidates contested each of the polls with only one and two women winning the respective polls. In 2004, four candidates were in fray but none managed to win. In 2009, 11 women candidates contested the polls with only two winning. The highest number of 16 women candidates had contested but only two were elected in 2014 Loksabha elections.¹⁴ Again, the 17th Loksabha elections, 2019, witnessed the decline in the number of women elected which is only one from Guwahati Parliamentary seat.

Women elected to Rajya Sabha from Assam till date are – Pushpalata Das, Basanti Devi, Anowara Taimur, Naznin Faruque and Rani Narah. Though the number of women as contestants has increased but the number of elected females in compare to elected male contestants is still low. Thus, it can be said that women representation from Assam in National politics is not impressive at all.

¹⁰ Nancy D Cruz, "Women In Politics: Looking Beyond Reservations", Jan 30, 2020, <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/01/30/women-politics-beyond-reservations/>, Retrieved on 5/5/2021.

¹¹ Dr. Dhaneswar Baishya, "Political Participation of Women of Assam with Special Reference to Nalbari District", *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol II, Issue III, September, 2016, p. 88.

¹² Sivanath Barman, *Asomiya Nari Otiya Aru Uttaran*, Guwahati: Students Store, 2002, pp. 70-76.

¹³ Op.cit, Sivanath Barman, p. 76

¹⁴ "MARGINAL DECLINE IN NUMBER OF WOMEN CANDIDATES IN ASSAM", *BUSINESS STANDARD*, 21ST APRIL, 2019.

IV. RESERVATION: THE NEED OF HOUR

The countries where there are representations in the parliament have highest number of females, the quota system or 'reservation' seems to be a common factor behind more women in politics as legislators. For instance, while women dominate Rwanda's national legislature, it is because of the thirty percent quota for women in parliament and government, a 2014 electoral law in Bolivia required 50 percent of each political party's list be women. Similarly, countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, South Africa etc., too have legislated quotas that women are elected in their respective parliaments. Argentina adopted the world's first gender quota law in 1991, mandating that political parties nominate women for 30 percent of the electable positions on their candidate lists. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has also instituted reservations but only for seats in local governments. In the year 1994, a new Panchayat Act was passed following the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 of the Constitution of India. This provided for one-third reservation for women in all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions and thousands of women got opportunity to participate in the elections of PRIs.

To increase the participation of women in the parliament, Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in the upper and lower house, but this is still pending in Lok Sabha, despite its reintroduction. This Bill proposes to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33 percent seats in the lower house of the parliament, Lok Sabha, and in all state legislative assemblies for women. The Women's Reservation Bill was initially introduced in the parliament on September 12, 1996 by the United Front government of HD Deve Gowda. Vajpayee government pushed for the bill in Lok Sabha but it still wasn't passed. UPA-I government, led by Congress, again introduced the bill to reserve seats for women in Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies in May 2008. After its reintroduction, the bill was passed by Rajya Sabha on March 9, 2010, but was still left pending in Lok Sabha.¹⁵

The way equal voting rights have increased women's participation as voters in India, in order to increase their participation as representatives, reservation is must. 26 years ago, the demand starts with 33 percent reservation for women and now it should be 50 percent reservation.

V. CONCLUSION

To wind up, it can be said that the kind of position women are enjoying in the political sphere of India in general and in Assam in particular, must change for a healthier and strong democracy and women must be given equal position in national politics not only as voters but also as decision makers. Even though reservations are an important tool for more women in politics to enter the parliament, a positive enabling environment alive with gender equality in terms of access and opportunities, distribution of resources are equally important. Moreover, the liberty to take action without pressure and work independently will make a great impact on their performance and a transformation in their leadership. Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and hope this will be achieved soon.

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¹⁵ "Women's Reservation Bill: All you need to know about the bill which will bring 33 percent reservation for women in Lok Sabha", 7th March, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/women-s-reservation-bill-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-bill-which-is-yet-to-be-passed-in-lok-sabha-1653451-2020-03-07>, Retrieved on 11/5/2021.

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