

## **Women's Political Representation And Leadership: A Study With Special Reference To Assam**

**Topu Choudhury**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Chilarai College, Golakganj, Dhubri,  
Assam India, PIN-783334.

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### **Abstract:**

The Constitution of India guarantees equal political opportunities both for men and women. As women are equal citizens and therefore should share equally with men in decision making processes. The political participation, representation and share in public decision making determine the status of women in society. It has been observed that the political participation of women as an elected representative in the legislatures is very insignificant in most of the parts of the world. Especially, in India where women constitute half of the population, the overall percentage of political representation of women and their share in decision making bodies is very negligible. Undoubtedly, a few women from strong political antecedents have been holding high level executive and political post in the decision making bodies; but it does not reveal the political, social or economic empowerment of women. Women's political participation and representation are highly desirable in a healthy democracy as the political participation and representation are regarded as the pillars of a successful democracy. In this context, the paper attempts to study the political representation and leadership potentialities of women of Assam from 1952 to 2019.

**Keywords:** Constitution of India; Participation; Representation; Legislature; Negligible; Empowerment; Democracy.

### **Introduction:**

The system of political representation prevails in almost of the civilized parts of the world. Participation and representation in political affairs acts as a helping hand for the common people to be effective and relates them with the functioning of political system. The right to participate in political affairs is a basic aspect for the proper functioning of a democratic polity. According to the system of political representation, a country is divided into many territorial units and each unit is allowed to send one or more representatives to the legislature through direct or indirect elections. The voters irrespective of their professions, caste, creed, religion, etc vote together and elect someone who is expected to represent their interests (Mahajan: 1999). According to T.R Baruah "political representation refers to the political activities undertaken in representative democracies, by the citizens who are elected to the

political office on behalf of their fellow citizens who do not hold public office (2019: 19). The concept of political representation can be regarded as an arrangement whereby the elected representative is enabled to speak and act on behalf of some other with authority in the best interest of citizens.

### **Women Leadership and Political Representation: A Context**

Leadership is a social phenomenon that is found everywhere. Leadership can be regarded as the process of influencing a group towards the achievement of goals and directing the organization to make it more collective and systematic. In the words of Bernard “leadership focuses the attention of group members into the desired direction”. Vroom and Jago refers leadership as a “potential or capacity to influence others”.

Past researchers reveals that the women leadership and their presence in decision making bodies especially in the political sphere are restricted from the local to the global level. In almost all countries, women have the right to vote, yet there are still scandalously few women in positions of political leadership. “Globally just 25 percent of national political parliamentarians are female and 24 out of 191 countries did women hold less than 10 percent of seats in their respective parliaments” (IPU, 2020).

The Constitution of India guarantees universal adult franchise and provides the framework for women to participate actively in politics. Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on the ground of religion, sex, race, colour, creed, language or place of birth. According to Baishya “in spite of such constitutional safeguards, the participation of women in national and state level politics is very less. The participation of women as contestants, representatives and holding portfolios in decision making bodies is not satisfactory” (2010 :376). The percentage of women representation in Lok Sabha from 1952 to 2004 elections is marked at less than 10 percent. However, the percentage of elected women in Lok Sabha election of 2009, 2014 and 2019 is marked at 10.87%, 11.7% and 14.4% respectively (Source: Election Commission of India, 2019). Though an important progress has been made in 2019 (17<sup>th</sup>) Lok Sabha election where women’s representation averages 14.4%, still their number is not sufficient for a country like India where half of the population is consisted by women. A few Indian women have been able to occupy the highest post of parliamentary governance like Indira Gandhi- the first woman and four times Prime Minister of India, Pratibha Devi Singh Patil- the first women President of India, Meira Kumar- the first woman Speaker of Lok Sabha and Sumitra Mahajan –the second woman Speaker of Lok Sabha. Moreover, 16 women have occupied the post of Chief Minister in various States of India. These figures clearly reveals that women’s political participation and their role in decision making bodies is quite insufficient and indicates towards having some kind of reluctance on the part of women to join active politics.

Similarly, in the context of Assam, the political parties do not paid much attention in bringing women in the political field. In almost all election, political parties used women both as instrument of campaign and objects (women’s welfare) set forth for achievements. According to A. kalita “when Assam Gana Parishad was formed in 1985, not a single women was

introduced in the central executive body of the party. It can be considered that the arena of politics or political party are structurally male dominated and most party men are not free from general prejudices and outlook of the society”(2010:394). Those women belonging to strong political family background has joined in politics and contested elections either in Lok Sabha or State legislative Assembly. Mofida Ahmed, the first woman Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha from Assam, Renuka Devi Barkakati, Rashida Hoque Choudhury, Anawara Taimur, Hemoprava Saikia, Alaka Desai Sarma, Jayashree Goswami Mahanta, Ajanta Neog, Jibontara Ghatowar, Rani Narah, Sushmita Dev, Suman Haripriya are some of the glaring examples who holds strong political background and connections which had made the way easier to make a mark on active politics (Kalita, 395). Till date, Anawara Taimur is the only woman Chief Minister in Assam. The minimal level of participation of women in political representation and decision making bodies has led to the marginalization of the female gender and increased discrimination against women in Assam. In a gender biased society like ours, it is firmly belief that family is the world for women and politics is the world for men. Consequently, women are hardly encouraged to select political career and to take political leadership.

In such a dismal picture, the question arises- Why is Women Leadership Important? Women’s equal participation in the form of representation and leadership in decision making processes at every level is pivotal to attempt to eliminate the prevailing gender-biasness. In order to challenge the unequal and unkindly social systems, it has been argued that women need to be politically visible and be empowered to act in that capacity to secure the fundamental resources they required for dignified and rewarding lives. According to Sweetman, Smyth and Coates ” women’s presence in significant numbers in elected bodies can result in more equitable policy outcomes because it is likely to encourage policy makers to give more attention to issues affecting women, such as better conditions of employment, child care, violence against women, etc”(2009:12)

### **Review of Literature:**

Bhagwan & Bhusan (2014) in the book “Political Theory” argues that the condition of women in political arena is very poor. They argued that each political party stands for women’s participation in political activities in such a big way. But, do we see the reflection of their wishes in parliament? Today after 70 years of implementation of the Indian constitution, their number has increased marginally. Moreover, the Women reservation Bill is yet to be enacted which gives 33% reservation of seats to women in the Parliament and State Assemblies.

Hota (2020) in the work “Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj” argues that the real participation of women in actual decision making bodies is very meager. However, the 2019 Parliamentary election of India witnessed the maximum number 783 women contested out of which 78 i.e. around 14% women could manage to win the election. The number of elected women is very low compared to men.

A report “Women in Parliament” (2020) published in Inter Parliamentary Union reveals that Parliaments and Political Parties can play a decisive role in supporting women’s political participation through specific empowerment programmes, or by enabling women to access leadership positions and providing training and mentoring opportunities.

Iyer (2019) in the article “Getting More Women into Politics: Evidence from Elections in India” published in the Centre for Economic Policy Research mentions that the membership of women in national parliaments is very low, though women constitute half of the world’s population. The inadequate and under- representation of women could have effects for significant representation of women’s interests. She argues that improving women’s knowledge, self-confidence, voice and mobility could have remarkable effects on their political participation.

Kumar (2018) in the article “Participation of Women in Politics- Worldwide Experience” published in the Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences mentions that women are facing obstacles in their political participation worldwide. To him women need political empowerment so that they can demonstrate their abilities outside the house itself and should be given equal status by eliminating gender discrimination with them. However, on the contrary, despite their proven abilities as “leaders and agents of change”, from the local to the global level, women’s leadership and political participation is restricted.

Pathak (2008) in his book “Assamese Women in Indian Independence Movement” argues that women in Assam have played significant role in socio-political movements, starting from Freedom movement to Assam movement, but none of these women have made it to the ranks of decision making bodies. Women in Assam find themselves marginalized in the process of decision making and their participation and visibility in formal electoral politics is extremely low.

### **Objectives:**

The prime objectives of this paper are to analyze Assam’s women representation in Lok Sabha and State Assembly and to study the position of women leadership. This paper also tries to study the representation of women belonging to different caste and communities. Finally, it also attempts to highlight the causes of less participation of women in active politics.

### **Methodology:**

This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected through official report and election records. For collection of secondary data various books, journals, newspapers, research articles as well as internet sources are consulted to collect detail information.

### **Discussion and Findings of the Study:**

India’s poor record on women’s representation is starkly revealed by the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index 2019, where it has slipped 28 places, ranking 140 among

156 countries. India is the third-worst performer in South Asia, only ahead of Pakistan and Afghanistan, behind Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan. The biggest slump is in the political empowerment sub-index, where India ranks 51, dropping from 18 last year ([https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2019.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2019.pdf)). It is beyond doubt that there is no dearth of women leaders in India's as well as Assam's major political parties, but they are regularly sidelined and denied a party ticket to contest elections indicating politics as male dominated and complicated process. The prevailing male dominance in society does not provide scope for women to participate in active politics. Women in Assam are poorly represented in higher leadership levels. The level of representation and leadership position of women of Assam in Lok Sabha and Assam State Legislative Assembly can be presented as below:

**Table 1.1 Women Contesting Candidates and number of Elected women in Lok Sabha and Ministers from Assam (1952-2019)**

Year of Election	Number of Contesting Candidates		Number of Elected Women	Number of Union ministers from Assam (Women)
	Men	Women		
1952	38	2	1	0
1957	29	2	2	0
1962	38	3	2	0
1967	45	2	1	0
1971	75	3	1	0
1977	37	3	2	2
1980	5	2	0	0
1984	105	1	0	0
1989	Due to security concerns election was not held			
1991	159	8	0	0
1996	128	9	0	0
1998	98	3	1	0
1999	106	9	2	1
2004	110	6	0	0

2009	158	11	2	1
2014	164	19	2	0
2019	152	15	1	0
Total	1447	98	17	4

**Source: Election Commission, India**

The table 1.1 clearly shows that a total of 98 women have contested the Lok Sabha elections held from 1952 to 2019, out of which 17 women have been elected. Interestingly, no women were elected in the elections held in 1980, 1984 and 2004 respectively. Among the elected women candidates from all elections only four elected women from Assam has been able to get Ministries of State portfolios in various departments. Moreover, there exists a vast difference between the number of men and women contestants.

**Table 1.2 Distribution of male/female Contesting Candidates and number of Elected Candidates in Assam Legislative Assembly (1952-2016)**

Year of election	Number of male contestants	Number of elected male	Number of female contestants	Number of elected female	Women Chief Minister	Women Speaker/ Deputy Speaker
1952	449	92	6	2	-	-
1957	304	89	6	5	-	-
1962	405	101	4	4	-	-
1967	486	121	6	4	-	-
1972	510	114	12	8	-	-
1978	918	125	20	1	<b>December 6, 1980 to June 30,1981(Syeda Anwara Taimur)</b>	-
1983	472	107	3	2	-	-
1985	1124	121	29	5	-	-
1991	1607	121	50	5	-	-
1996	1012	116	17	6	-	-
2001	861	116	55	10	-	-

2006	927	113	70	13	-	<b>Deputy Speaker (Pranati Phukan)</b>
2011	896	112	85	14	-	-
2016	973	118	91	8	-	-
Total	10944	1566	454	87	1	1

**Source: Election Commission, India**

The table 1.2 reveals the fact that women have been underrepresented in the Assam State Legislative Assembly. 2011 election saw the highest number of elected women till date. Moreover, there is a huge margin between the numbers of male contesting candidates and women contesting candidates. From 1952 to 2016, the State Assembly Election in Assam has been held for 14 times, where only 87 women have been elected as Member of Legislative Assembly out of 454. Assam has 126 seats at present, but the participation of women in the state's legislature is very low in comparison to men. Till date no woman has occupied the post of Speaker in Assam Legislative Assembly.

**Table 1.3 Distributions of Women Elected Candidates of Assam in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly belonging to different Caste and Communities from 1952 to 2019**

Year of Election	Lok Sabha				Year of Election	Assam legislative Assembly			
	ST	SC	Muslim	Gen		ST	SC	Muslim	Others
1952	1	-	-		1952	-	-	-	-
1957			1	1	1957	-	-	-	-
1962				2	1962	-	-	1	-
1967				1	1967	-	-	-	-
1971				1	1972	-	-	1	-
1977			1	1	1978	-	-	1	-
1980					1983	-	-	1	-
1984					1985	1	1	-	-

1991					1991	1	-	1	-
1996					1996	2	1	-	-
1998				1	2001	2	-	2	-
1999				2	2006	3	1	-	-
2004					2011	3	1	1	-
2009				2	2016	2	1	-	-
2014				2	Total	14	5	8	
2019				1					
Total	1	-	2	14					

**Source: Election Commission of India.**

The table 1.3 reveals that the representation of women of Assam belonging to Schedule Tribes (ST), Schedule Caste (SC) and Muslim Community in Lok Sabha and Assam State Legislative is very poor. In Lok Sabha, only 2 women from Muslim Community and 1 woman from ST have been elected till date. Moreover, in State Assembly election, 8 women from Muslim community, 14 women from ST and 5 women from SC have been elected from 1952-2016 elections. Interestingly, Pramila Rani Brahma (ST) has been elected 6 times and Syeda Anwara Taimur (Muslim) has been elected 4 times to legislative assembly. This indicates that women nominated to political contest, belong to elite families with political predecessor. The major political parties are also reluctant to nominate women in elections. Moreover, woman be it from marginalized community or not, they had to confront both societal and economic hurdles to make a entity in politics.

India has primarily relied upon the reservation policy to ensure women's presence in decision making bodies. This has only increased the percentage of seats of women as an elected representative but not the capacity of women as leaders. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment, 1992 provided constitutional recognition to rural and urban local self governance units and reserved 33 percent of seats for women. Most recently, the Cabinet has approved to enhance this reservation to 50% in Panchayats and urban governance through 110<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bill. This has definitely increased the percentage of seats for women in local bodies thereby making them socially and politically empower. Noticeably, till date no seats in India have been reserved for women in Parliament and State legislatures, thereby limiting women's representation and leadership role in formulating policies for the development of the nation.

Women of Assam have played a significant role in various social- political movements, starting from the Freedom Movement of India, their visibility and numbers in decision making bodies has been very poor. Only a few women have been elected to the Parliament or the state's legislative assembly. Similarly, only a few women have got the opportunity to



successfully perform their responsibilities as ministers in the council of ministers of Assam. Syeda Anwara Taimur, Pramila Rani Brahma, Ajanta Neog, Pranati Phukan are some of the few women ministers in the State Assembly in Assam. Syeda Anwara Taimur became the first woman Chief Minister of Assam (December 6, 1980 to June 30, 1981) amidst political instability during the period of Assam Movement launched by All Assam Students' Union between 1979 and 1985. Following the Assam agitation, Presidents' Rule was imposed in Assam in 1981, Anwara's term ended immediately. It has been found that in the process of decision making, women in Assam find themselves marginalized. They have no space in formal politics, even in areas where the Assamese women have played a pivotal role in a combined struggle on any particular issue.

### **Challenges to Women Representation and Participation in Politics:**

The study reveals that there are certain various challenges in achieving participation and representation of women in governance. The gender inequality, age old beliefs and values, marriage and reproductive role, economic rights and political consciousness, fear of violence, illiteracy, reluctance of men to recognize women in politics, government's negligence are some of the challenges and constraints in the way of women's representation and participation in formal politics. In the context of Assam, some more challenges can be discussed responsible for poor representation of women. These are as follows;

**Policy of Tickets distribution:** In a biased male dominated society like ours, the political parties, be it national or regional; give less importance to women for contesting parliamentary and assembly elections. Political parties are reluctant to give tickets to women to contest election as the parties do not want to invest their energy in election of women contestants. In some cases, women candidates are dropped down to make political compromises or given tickets for constituencies where there is little scope of winning (Desai & Thakkar: 2001). A few tickets are distributed amongst women candidates depending on some of the factors like strong political family linkages. The turnout of women as voter has been very good in Assam but the party tickets given to women for contesting elections have been very poor. The strength of total electorate does not indicate the strength of representation and participation.

**Limited Spaces for Marginalized Women:** The Constitution of India guarantees equal political rights for both men and women; still the representation of women in Parliamentary and State Assembly has been very disappointing, especially women belonging to marginalized sections of the society. Table 1.3 clearly reveals that political participation of women is worse belonging to different caste and communities. Till date no women from Adivasi communities and other communities like the Koch Rajbonshis, Rabhas, have been elected either in the Parliamentary or State Assembly elections. Unarguably, women have the desire and potential to contest elections, but she has to fight both the societal norms and economical constraints to make a space in active politics.

**Less Nomination of Women from Local Governance to Higher Level:** In pursuance of the 112<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill, 2009 Assam has reserve 50% seats for women in rural and urban governance. The reservation policy for women has only increased the percentage

of women in local bodies, and in most occasions men utilized political power on behalf of their elected wives or daughters. However, it cannot be denied that there are a few women who have been able to do well for themselves within these circumstances and rise up the hierarchy (Bharadwaj: 2021). Past studies and researches reveal that women in local bodies have proved to be competent and efficient leaders but political parties be it national or regional have failed to recognize and as a consequent, a very few women from local governance has rise up to the State or National Level politics. A few women particularly Hemoprobha Saikia and Queen Ojha are some of the women who were the Mayors of Guwahati Municipal Corporation, Assam in 1995 and 1996 respectively and both of them were elected in the Assam State Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha in 2001 and 2019 respectively. The percentage of women from local bodies to higher level is very disappointing where women constitutes half of the population and it is believed that only legislated quotas for women will increase adequate women representation in assembly and parliament.

### **Conclusion:**

The participation of women in politics though increasing, it is unquestionably not satisfactory. Women's role in decision making processes has not been taken into consideration. However, there are no legal constraints in the women representation or participation of women in the electoral process. But in reality there exists some challenges which prevent women in taking active role in politics that needs to be removed through legally and socially to ensure full participation of women in politics. Women require to become conscious of their role in politics and the importance of their active participation in electoral process. The responsibility concerning the equal representation and participation of women in politics should be undertaken by the women organizations, social and political organizations because the existence of women in decision making bodies will surely bring different insights to the political sphere. Therefore, adequate women's participation in politics is highly needed which is not only a demand of simple justice or democracy but, a prerequisite condition for human existence.

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