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## **Women in Electoral Politics: A Study of South Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*The nature and success of any democratic system largely depends upon the extent to which equal and effective participation is provided to all irrespective of gender, color, caste, religion, race, language etc. Since, women constitute nearly half of the total population their equal participation in all spheres of life including politics is very important. This is because such participation will enable them to be a part in the decision making process which, in turn, will help in their development as well as empowerment. Moreover, since politics is a game of power and power being the deciding factor in moulding relations in society, women's role in politics and their participation is vital not only to seek solution to their problems, but also to their position in, and contribution to, society. In the recent decades though there has been growing acceptance and recognition of women's role in politics, a total change is yet to be noticed. In India, after the independence, despite various constitutional measures the participation and representation of women in the Parliament and State Legislatures is abysmally low. This low participation is worrisome as it is against the achievement of our democratic ideals. Against the background of women's position vis-à-vis political participation and representation, the present paper based on primary and secondary resources tries to explore the extent of political participation and representation of women in south Assam (Barak Valley) with reference to recent Assam Assembly election 2016.*

**Key Words:** *Women, Political Participation and Representation, South Assam, Reservation Policy.*

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**Introduction:** "Government of the people, by the people and for the people" is the fundamental definition of democracy, and one which implies participation by the people. In any Democratic political system whether large or small, political participation is the most essential ingredient and as such occupies a prominent place. Citizen's full participation in the governance of their own lives is central to a thriving civil society and such participation is an expression of citizenship and is crucial in engendering a shared political culture. Thus the objective of participatory Democracy in India becomes meaningful only when the political institutions are allowed to grow and develop with effective participation of the

people. In fact, the nature and success of democracy at all levels largely depends upon the extent to which equal, effective and actual participation is provided to all irrespective of gender, color, caste, religion, race, language etc. by the system. Denial of equal and effective participation in the decision making process to any section affects the working of true democracy.

Since, women constitute nearly half of the total population their equal participation in all spheres of life including politics is very important. This is because such participation will enable them to be a part in the decision making process which, in turn, will help in their development as well as empowerment. Besides, in order to frame right policies, strategies as well as laws for their welfare, development and empowerment, it is very essential to know the attitudes and needs of women. Empowerment of women generally indicates equal status of women, equal access to resources, opportunity and freedom to develop them and most importantly, equal participation in the process of decision making in all spheres of life including political process. Hence, women's participation and representation in political sphere and decision making bodies seem important because it will not only inject a new life in democratic setup, but also at least make a mark on male-dominated socio-economic and political structures, that will ultimately affect the whole society. Since politics is a game of power and power being the deciding factor in moulding relations in society, women's role in politics and the nature and scope of their participation is vital not only to seek solution to their problems, but also to their position in, and contribution to, society.

Throughout the world, women's equal participation in social, economic and political spheres is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resources, rights and entitlement for women. However, there is a universal consensus on the empowerment of women and women's movements have raised women's aspirations and brought significant changes in the status of women, though the process is rather gradual and not dramatic. In the recent decades though there has been some acceptance and recognition of women's role in politics, a total change is yet to be noticed as they are still disproportionately represented in the political sphere. In India, after the independence, a large number of legislative and executive measures have been undertaken to improve the political participation of women. But women have not much benefited from such laws as they remain marginalized in politics. Their presence in the Parliament and State Legislatures as elected representatives is abysmally low. This low participation is worrisome as it is against the achievement of our democratic ideals. Moreover, until and unless women are politically empowered they will find it very difficult to project their issues and concerns in the mainstream decision making processes, which ultimately affect their achievement of substantive equality and development. Recognizing the low level of participation of women, the Government of India enacted the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 in order to provide 33% reservation of seats for women in local self- governing bodies. This policy is undoubtedly an affirmative action that attempts to empower women politically by ensuring equal access and increased participation in political power structure for women.

*Against the background of women's position vis-à-vis political participation, the present paper based on primary and secondary resources tries to explore the extent of political participation and representation of women in south Assam with reference to recent Assam Assembly election 2016 in the light of reservation policy*

**Representation of women in electoral politics of Assam at all levels: An overview:**

The Indian parliament enacted the historic 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act in 1992 which came into force in 24 April 1993. In conformity with the provisions of this Act, almost all states including 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> schedule states except Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram amended their respective Panchayati Raj Act. As a sequel to it, the Government of Assam also enacted the Panchayati Raj Act 1994 which includes almost all the features of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. One of the important features of this Act is the provision of 33% reservation of seats for women (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SC and ST)<sup>1</sup> at the PRIs under Articles 243D and 243T of the Indian constitution for ensuring greater participation of women in the democratic functioning of local self-governing institutions. Though, the significance of greater representation of women in the decision making process for the purpose of their empowerment on the one hand and community development on the other, was felt for a long time but it was given a concrete shape only through this Act. However, there was a lot of opposition and criticism on this issue because critics argued that women are not experienced enough in politics and they will be only “dummy political leaders”. Besides, some people argued that it will encourage in the creation of new categories of reservation which is discriminatory in democracy. In spite of all resistance, this provision was revolutionary to involve women both as the beneficiaries and the decision makers in the community development at the grass-root level as well as public life.

With regard to the representation of women in the electoral politics of Assam, it is observed that before 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, the percentage of women representatives in PRIs was only 4.5% which after the reservation has increased up to 40 percent in all over India.<sup>2</sup> Besides, there is no denying the fact that it is due to the reservation policy the percentage of women representatives is more in the local level than the state and national level elections of Assam. This is more evident from the following table – 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Rajya Sabha secretariat, *Reservation of seats for women in legislative bodies: perspectives*, New Delhi: 2008, P 9

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, P 10

**Table - 1: Representation of women in electoral politics of Assam at all levels**

Sl. No.	Name of the Election	Total No. of elected representatives	Women representatives	Percentage
1	Panchayat (2013)	26844	9903	36.9%
2	Lok Sabha (2014)	14	2	14.3%
3	Vidhan Sabha (2016)	126	8	6.35%

Note: women combined SC, ST and General categories

Thus, it is clear from the above Table– 1 that the representation of women in Assam Panchayat level election (2013) is 36.9%, while it is 14.3% in Lok Sabha election (2013) and 6.35% in Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) election (2016). This signifies that the participation and representation of women is more in the Panchayat elections than the Lok Sabha and vidhan Sabha elections. This quantitative leap in the representation of women at all levels of PRIs is undoubtedly due to the implementation of reservation policy.

In the recent Assam Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) election 2016, the participation as well as representation of women is very low. Out of total 1064 candidates only 91 (85 in 2011 Assembly election) women candidates have contested the election where only eight (14 in 2011 Assembly election) women have managed to win the election. Though the trend of women participation is little bit higher than the previous Assembly election but there is a decline of winning the election by women. This is more evident from the following table – 2

**Table - 2: Representation of women in electoral politics of Assam**

Sl. No.	Name of the Election	Total No. of elected representatives	Women representatives	Percentage
1	Vidhan Sabha (2011)	126	14	11.1%
2	Vidhan Sabha (2016)	126	8	6.35%

Thus, it is clear from the above Table – 2 that the representation of women in Assam Assembly election (2011) is 11.1%, while it is only 6.35% in Assembly election (2016). This signifies the trend of lower representation of women in Assembly elections. This may be due to the absence of reservation policy on the one hand and the lack of support of Political parties on the other coupled with several other factors.

**Participation and Representation of women in electoral politics of South Assam:** In case of South Assam or Barak Valley (comprising three districts of Assam i.e. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi) there are altogether 112 candidates among which only five are females and 106 are males who have contested for 15 Assembly seats of South Assam in 2016. These five women candidates are 1) Smt. Bithika Dev (Silchar Constituency), 2) Dr. Rumi Nath (Borkhola Constituency), 3) Smt. Sujata Sinha (Katigorah Constituency), 4)

Smt. Aparna Tiwari (Udharbond Constituency) and 5) Smt. Shipra Gun (South Karimganj Constituency). This is more evident from the following table – 3.

**Table - 3: Participation of women in electoral politics of South Assam 2016<sup>3</sup>**

Name of the Election	Total No. of candidates	Women candidates	Women elected representatives
Assam Assembly election (2016)	112	5 (4.46%)	None

Thus, it is clear from the above Table – 3 that, the percentage of participation of women as candidates from south Assam in 2016 Assembly election is very low i.e. only 4.46%, where as their representation is nil as none of the women candidates have managed to win the election. Moreover, if we look at the participation of women from Bishnupriya Manipuri Community, it is found that only one woman namely Smt. Sujata Sinha (Jana-congress Party) have contested from Katigorah Constituency though she lost the election which implies that the political representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women is nil in South Assam.

**Conclusion:** On the basis of the above analysis it can be said that due to absence of reservation policy at the Assembly and parliamentary level, it becomes very difficult for women to achieve the goal of their equal participation and representation in electoral politics. On the other hand, because of the implementation of reservation policy at the local bodies there is a paradigm shift in the political participation and representation of women at the Panchayat level in India in general and Assam in particular. One big positive impact of the reservation policy is the increased (more than 33%) presence of women in the local self-governing bodies in rural areas of Assam. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has undoubtedly given a new dimension to the process of political empowerment of women in Assam. In-fact, the reservation policy has led to the formal empowerment of women in Panchayats and the emergence of new leadership. Due to reservation policy, even much-marginalized and minority women have got the opportunity to participate and have proved better leaders by their commendable work and activities despite constraints like illiteracy, lack of experience as well as resources, family responsibilities, socio-cultural norms etc.

To conclude, though the impact of 73rd Amendment Act is mixed one but it has made significant difference both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The reservation policy has undoubtedly influenced the participation and representation of women in electoral politics at the grass-root level in the rural areas of Assam. The reservation policy has certainly changed the situation of local women and ensured their adequate representation at different levels of Panchayati Raj institutions. As we can see that due to the reservation of seats at the local bodies more and more women, despite the existence of multiple hurdles and multidimensional constraints, are getting elected while in case of the state and national level elections of Assam where there is no reservation, their representation is very low. Thus, there is a need to exhibit optimism and make further affirmative actions at the Assembly

<sup>3</sup> *Dainik Jugoshankha*, no 16, May 20, 2016, Silchar edition.

and Parliamentary level for facilitating a non-discriminatory political participation and representation for women.

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