

Political Empowerment of Women: A Contemporary Study of Assam

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Abstract: Empowerment of women in all spheres and especially in politics is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of a gender equal society. Empowerment can be defined as a process of awareness, capacity building, effective decision making power and transformative action. Political empowerment is the process of acquiring different elements of power which includes capabilities, positions and resources. Political empowerment is crucial for the development and progress of women. Women will be politically empowered only if there is adequate and equal representation and participation of women in politics. Participation of women in politics makes the democratic system more efficient and viable. However, after 75 years independence, a large number of women are still excluded from active participation in the political arena. Assamese women have not yet been able to make their presence felt in the regional or national political scene. This paper is an attempt to analyze the political empowerment of women and the barriers to the political empowerment of women in the state of Assam.

Keywords: Women, Political Participation, Empowerment, Rights, Assam

1. Introduction

Women empowerment refers to equal dignity, opportunities and freedom for women to develop themselves. Women empowerment requires equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant and participate in decision-making processes. Empowerment of women in the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and the foundation of a gender equal society. Political empowerment can be defined as the ability to planning, implementation and influence decision making process as well as evaluation of a political system. Political empowerment that includes voting rights, contestation, campaigning, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions. Political empowerment of women gives due recognition to women on an equal footing with men, referring to the process of participating with human dignity in the development process of society through political institutions.

The Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and class, gives equal political rights to all citizens, and provides for reservation of seats for women to eliminate gender discrimination. Despite the constitutional provisions for gender equality, only a few women in the legislature have been able to make their own decisions. Indian women are relatively disabled and have enjoyed a lower status than men since independence and Assam is not an exception. Indian women have been under-represented in institutional politics since independence. In the last two decades, there was a greater concern towards increasing women's participation in political institutions, leading to empowerment."

Political power is the strongest weapon to empower women, but it is in the sector of politics that women all over the world are lagging behind men. This is due to the fact that the state machinery had been a creation of man and since its inception, women were kept outside it" (Baruah, S.L., 2003). The equal participation of women in political life plays an

important role in the general process of women empowerment. In the context of Assam, despite their glorious history, women in Assam have not been able to occupy a good position in the decision-making process and have not been able to take a leading role in party politics. However, as a voter, Assamese women have made significant progress in the recent years. Almost 82.4% voters turn out. But in terms of percentage of representation of assamese women in loksabha and vidhansabha are very low.

Women have not yet reached a satisfactory position in terms of political participation and decision-making. Despite their major role in politics in the pre-independence era, the number of women participating in politics in the post-independence period is very low. From the beginning, women have been able to occupy fewer seats in both Parliament and State Assemblies, they have been strategically excluded from active politics. It can be cleared from the following tables:

Table 1: Assamese Women in General Election in India

Elections	No. of seats available	Female contestants	Female elected	Percentage of female to total seats
1952	10	2	1	10
1957	10	2	2	20
1962	12	3	2	16
1967	14	2	1	7.14
1971	14	3	1	7.14
1977	14	3	2	14.28
1980	14	2	0	0
1984	14	1	0	0
1991	14	8	0	0
1996	14	9	1	7.14
1998	14	3	1	7.14
1999	14	9	2	14.29
2004	14	6	0	0
2009	14	11	2	14.29
2014	14	16	2	14.29
2019	14	13	1	7.14

Source: www.eci.nic.in

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Table 2: Political participation of women in Assam legislative assembly elections

Elections	No. of seats available	Female contestants	Female elected	Percentage of female winners
1951	94	1	1	0.93
1957	94	6	5	4.63
1962	105	4	4	3.81
1967	126	7	5	3.97
1972	114	12	8	7.02
1978	126	22	1	0.79
1983	126	3	2	1.59
1985	126	29	5	3.97
1991	126	50	5	3.97
1996	126	45	7	5.56
2001	126	55	11	8.73
2006	126	70	13	10.32
2011	126	85	15	11.90
2016	126	91	8	6.35
2021	126	76	5	3.97

Source: www.eci.nic.in

Based on the data shown above, it can be stated that the rate of political participation of women in Assam is not equal to that of men, but it is seen that women are now more attracted to political participation than before. During the last two decades, involvement in this field has increased significantly. So, this outcome will obviously create a positive impact among the new generation.

Objectives

- 1) To understand the issue of political empowerment and participation of women.
- 2) To analyse the political status of women in Assam.
- 3) To analyse the hinders to political empowerment of women in Assam.

2. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative research and descriptive in nature. The data and information were collected from secondary sources. Secondary information were collected from books, article, journal, newspaper, website etc.

Barriers to Political Empowerment of Women in Assam

There are many reasons why women in Assam face various obstacles to their political participation in the contemporary political context of Assam. The first obstacle in this regard is the patriarchal society. The status of women in electoral politics and governance is well below the desired level, as it is seen as a male playground and only a few women gain access to parliament or assemblies. Patriarchal contexts, prevailing societal value systems, private public divisions in terms of domain identification, male dominance in political institutions, etc. hinder to women's participation in politics in Assam (Schlozman et al., 2012; Stockemer, 2007).

Violence manifests in various forms including harassment, intimidation, physical harm or coercion, threats, financial pressure, etc. The above factors are among the factors that make women's political participation and representation in Assam extremely challenging. These can take place in homes or other private spaces, or in public places. These actions may be directed at women in any of their roles (e.g. voters, media, political actors, state actors, community

leaders, or election officials). It should be noted that men also face violence in politics but the purpose of violence against women in politics is to maintain the subordinate status of women in society and exclude them from decision-making positions.

It's also said that women don't get enough financial support from political parties to contest elections. Due to the unequal distribution of resources, they are unable to occupy a powerful position in politics as well as receive adequate political training (Chafetz, 2006; Ghani et al., 2013), societal and cultural norms and customs also prevent them from participating in politics. Similarly, another reason for the lack of participation of women in politics in Assam is poverty. Many women are unable to participate in politics despite their desire due to lack of financial strength.

Lack of political will is also one of the most important reasons why women do not participate in politics (Singh & Gupta, 2013; Bathla et al., 2012; Zani & Barrett., 2012). In the current context of Assam, there are still many women who are ignorant about their political rights and responsibilities and this ignorance act as an obstacle to women's empowerment. Another reason for the low participation of women in politics in Assam is their domestic responsibilities and workload. This makes it extremely difficult for them to spare more time for politics. These result in women not participating in politics in India as well as in Assam (Uslaner & Conway, 1985; Bhattacharjee, 2020).

3. Recommendations

The low participation of women in politics has become a critical issue, therefore it is the duty of every conscious citizen of a modern democracy to think about this issue and try to find some measures to address the problem. Since it is not a very easy task there has to be a collective effort from individuals, social organizations, media, political parties, judiciary, and state machinery.

Efforts to increase women's participation in politics by providing reservation of seats. Although, 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India reserved 33 per cent seats for women in local government, still women participation in national and state legislatures is very low. To create awareness among women about their political rights. Provide training programs to women on their right to participate in politics, decision-making roles, etc. Thus, an essential step in increasing women's political involvement is to educate women about political rights in a meaningful way. Educated women are more aware of their democratic rights. Therefore, another essential step in increasing women's political involvement is to promote education among women. Education helps people to get employment, so when women will be educated it will pave the way for their economic self-reliance. Economic autonomy will enable them to build self-confidence and they will be attracted to the politics of the state.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be seen that women of Assam are becoming aware of their political rights. Women's political participation has increased relatively compared to the past. Women's political participation is essential for a gender equal society and democracy. Political participation paves the way for them to participate in decision-making processes and it makes them responsible to society and democracy. It is clear that no society or democracy can be established as a truly gender equal society without political empowerment of women. Therefore, there is a need to make women aware of their political rights and responsibilities and attract them for political participation.

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