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Political Participation of Women of Assam with Special Reference to Nalbari District

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Abstract:

Political participation is the hall mark of a democratic setup. Nature, success and effectiveness of democracy largely depend on the extent to which equal, effective and actual participation is provided by the system to all its citizens. As women comprises half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in the political process. Democracy will fail in its objectives if women citizens lack equal opportunity to participate in the governmental decision making process. They are to be equal partners in the nation building and political development. Therefore, in this article an attempt has been made to study the participation in the electoral politics and politics of agitation by the women of Assam in general and Nalbari district in specific. We find that the participation of women of Assam including the women of Nalbari district in the mass movements since the time of freedom struggle to till date is overwhelming. However, in the electoral politics especially in active politics the participation of women is pathetic.

Key Words: Women, Political Participation, Women Representation.

Introduction: The term political participation generally refers to the voluntary activities of members of a society, in the selection of rulers and formation of public policy. Since popular sovereignty is one of the inseparable attributes of democracy, the right to participate in an important aspect of democratic government and an inherent right in a democratic process. Political participation helps the individual to be associated with the political system and the decision making process as such. The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defined political participation as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled (International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences 1968:253). It signifies such proceedings like voting, seeking information, discussing and proselytizing, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives etc. (ibid,254) To Almond and Powell political participation is the involvement of the members of the society in the decision making process of the system(Almond & Powell 1975:98) According to M C Closky, political participation “implies these voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly, in the formulation of public policy”

(Dowse 1972:290). Thus, political participation includes all the political activities like participation in the election process as voters and candidates, in political parties as workers and in the decision making process as representatives and executives. Traditionally, political participation is limited to participation in formal political structure, the legislature and the executive in a democratic set up. It has now been widened by political theorist to include movements, protests and struggles as legitimate expressions of political behavior. Thus, all behavior through which people directly express their opinion is political participation.

Thus, we find that political participation is the hall mark of a democratic setup. Nature, success and effectiveness of democracy largely depend on the extent to which equal, effective and actual participation is provided by the system to all its citizens. As women comprise half of the population, this section of society requires due attention in the system and a due share in the political process. Democracy will fail in its objectives if women citizens lack equal opportunity to participate in the governmental decision making process. They are to be equal partners in the nation building and political development. Therefore, in this article an attempt has been made to study the participation in the electoral politics and politics of agitation by the women of Assam in general and Nalbari district in specific. This study is fully based on secondary data.

Political Participation of Women in Assam: The political participation of women in Assam, like other parts of India, began in a miniature form since the freedom movement. However, 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, were a story of yesteryears. In 1921 Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam and he delivered lectures in different parts of the province. He also met Assamese women in some special meetings organized for them, where Gandhi asked the women to actively take part in the programmes 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 with the male in the same line. Participation in the picketing, public rally and public meetings etc. by the women of Assam at the time of Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1921), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and in the Quit India Movement (1942) became a common phenomenon. The participation of women of Assam in the Civil Disobedience Movement was so massive that prominent Assamese historian Benudhar Sarma described it as the women's movement. Women leaders like Chandra prabha Saikia, Amalprabha Das, Pushpalata Das, etc. had played dynamic role in the freedom movement. Fifteen women of Assam laid their lives in the freedom movement to the cause of India's freedom (Barman et.al 2002:70-76).

The participation of women of Assam in the freedom movement generated a sense of optimism among them and they began to organize themselves and established different women organizations. The first women's organization of Assam the '*Asom Mahila Samity*' (later *Asom Pradesik Mahila Samity*) was formed in 1926 by Chandra Prabha saikiani. This organization had played an active role in extending women's education, adult women education, mother and child welfare, setting up of *Khadi* and village industries, in restricting child marriages and in prohibiting the untouchability etc. In 1940 the women wing of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was formed. This wing had played a special role in the organization and training of the women. In 1941 the '*All Assam Girls Student conference*' (*Sadou Asom Satri Sanmilon*) was constituted.

We can discuss the participation of women of Assam in politics since 1947 broadly in two parts – their participation in mass movements and participation in electoral politics. After independence the role of women of Assam in electoral politics was not so significant and satisfactory. Though the constitution has provided equal opportunity to women to participate in the political process, yet it was considered as the exclusive domain of the male. But in the mass movements the role of women is found to be the same as in the freedom movement.

After independence, different mass movements were organized in Assam, raising some regional issues. These movements were State Language movement, 1960; Refinery Movement, 1967; Medium Movement, 1972; and Assam Movement on the foreigner's issue, 1975-1985. Assamese women freely participated in these social and political movements. Especially in the Assam Movement, millions of Assamese women came out on the street and participated in the different programmes of the movement like picketing, breaking curfew, black out, hunger strike, demonstration etc. In some parts of Assam they formed women wing like '*Mula Gabharu Sangha*' to make the programmes of agitation successful. Thirty two women were killed in police firing, attack by the evil elements and in other way when they were participating in the agitation. But their role in the success of the movement did not bear any fruitful result for the women in respect of electoral politics. In 1985 the Assam Accord was signed between the central government and the leaders of the Assam Movement. The leaders of the movement formed Asom Gana Parishad, (AGP) a new regional political party in 1985 and took part in the election to the Assam Legislative Assembly held in the same year. It was the irony that only two women had got opportunity to file nomination as candidates of AGP in that election despite millions of Assamese girl students and women participated in the Assam Movement. 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. Other national political parties were also reluctant to induct women into the electoral politics of the state.

Women of different tribal communities of Assam like the Karbi, the Bodo, the Missing and the Rabha etc. have been actively participating in the movements for autonomy of the respective communities organize by different organization of these communities. A number of women associations have also been formed by the women of these communities like –

Karbi Progressive Women Association (*Karbi Nimso Chinthur Asong – KNCA*), Missing Women Association, Bodo Women Justice Forum etc. These associations are working for the rights and security of the women as well as the autonomy of their own communities (Barman et. al 2002:77).

The participation of women of Assam in the electoral politics started before independence. In 1924 the Assam Legislative Assembly passed a resolution providing the right to vote to women and to contest in election. In the Legislative election held in 1937, Miss Mavis Dunn was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly from Shillong and she was the first women of Assam to be elected to provincial legislative assembly (Rao & Hazarika, 1983:171). After independence the participation of women in the electoral politics as voters and candidates has increased slowly. If we look the participation as voters we find that in the third assembly election held in 1962, 42.05 percent of women were cast their votes as against 51.05 percent of their male counterpart. Notably, it increased to 84.81 Percent in the Fourteenth Legislative Assembly Election (LAC) held in 2016. In the 12th LAC election (2006), the percentage of male voters was 76.49 and the percentage of women voters was 74.89, which was just 1.60 percent less than the male voters. In the 13th LAC election (2011) the male voter percentage was 76.85 and women voter percentage was 74.94, which was just 1.91 percent less. In the fourteenth LAC election, the percentage of male voters was 84.64 and the percentage of women voters was 84.81, which outnumbers the male voters. Thus we can infer that the participation of Assamese women as voters in the electoral politics is not far behind the male participation.

In Assam the number of elected women to the Legislative Assembly has never exceeded 11 percent from the first Assembly to the fourteenth assembly. In the first Assembly there was only one woman member. It increased to five in the second assembly. The highest number of women members were elected to the thirteenth Legislative Assembly constituted in 2011. In this Assembly 11 percent of the members were women. Promila Rani Brahma has been continuously elected to Assam Legislative Assembly since 1991 for six times. She played formidable role as Cabinet Minister in the department of Agriculture and now she is working as Forest Minister of Assam Cabinet. Anowara Taimur is the first woman Chief Minister, who took the responsibility of Chief Minister of Assam since December, 1980 to June, 1981. Few women members have got opportunity to successfully perform their responsibility as minister in the council of ministers and as deputy speaker of Assam Legislative Assembly since 1952.

Women in Assam Legislative Assembly: 1957 – 2016

| Assembly | Total Seats | Women Candidates | Elected |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1952-I | 108 | - | 1 |
| 1957-II | 94 | 6 | 5 |
| 1962-III | 105 | 4 | 4 |
| 1967-IV | 125 | 6 | 5 |
| 1972-V | 114 | 12 | 8 |

| | | | |
|-----------|-----|----|----|
| 1978-VI | 126 | 22 | 1 |
| 1983-VII | 109 | 3 | 2 |
| 1985-VIII | 126 | 29 | 4 |
| 1991-IX | 126 | 50 | 5 |
| 1996-X | 122 | 17 | 8 |
| 2001-XI | 126 | 55 | 10 |
| 2006-XII | 126 | 70 | 13 |
| 2011-XIII | 126 | 85 | 14 |
| 2016-XIV | 126 | - | 8 |

Source: Statistical Report on the Legislative Election: Election Commission of India

If we look to the women representation from Assam to national politics, we find that few women have elected to parliament i.e. to Loksabha and Rajyasabha. In 1952, for the first time Bonali Khongman was elected to Loksabha. In later periods Rani Manjula Devi, Mofida Ahmed, Jyotsna Chand, Renuka Devi Barkataki, Ranee Narah, Bijoya Chakrabarty and Sushmita Dev got elected to Loksabha. Jyotsna Chand, Renuka Devi Barkataki, Ranee Narah and Bijoya Chakrabarty have elected to Loksabha for multiple times. Renuka Devi Barkataki, Bijoya Chakrabarty and Ranee narah also carried out their responsibility as the ministers of the union Council of ministers. Women elected to Rajya Sabha from Assam till date is – Pushpalata Das, Basanti Devi, Anowara Taimur, Naznin Faruque and Rani Narah. Thus, we find that women representation from Assam in National politics is not impressive at all.

In the grassroots politics the participation of women has increased after 1990s. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1986 provided thirty percent reservation for women in Gaon Panchayat. In 1992, panchayat election was held according to the panchayat act of 1986. In 1994 a new panchayat act was passed following the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. This provided for one-third reservation in all the three tiers of PRIs. As a result, thousands of women got opportunity to participate in the politics of PRIs. Already the percentage of reservation has increased to fifty percent. Thus more women have involved in local politics.

Political Participation of Women in Nalbari District: The present Nalbari district was a subdivision of undivided Kamrup till it was formally declared a district on the 14th August, 1985. Nalbari district does not incorporate a whole Lok Sabha Constituency within its administrative areas. However, parts of three Lok Sabha constituencies fall within the district, which are Guwahati, Mangaldoi, and Barpeta. Nalbari district has been divided into three Legislative Assembly constituencies which are Nalbari, Barkhetri and Dharmapur. Nalbari has a long tradition of mass political movement. During the freedom movement of India Nalbari was one of the centers of the movement in Kamrup district. The people of Nalbari actively participated in different programmes of the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. After independence, the people of Nalbari participated in different agitation programmes and students' movements at different times which were launched on various regional issues, like Language movement (1960), Refinery movement (1967),

Assam Movement (1979 – 1985) on the foreigner's issue, and even in the secessionist movement led by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) since 1979.

Nalbari was one of the centre stages of the freedom movement in the district of Kamrup. A large number of volunteers from Nalbari actively took part in different phases of the freedom movement, courted arrest and went to jail and had to face inhuman torture by the British rulers. But there is no literary evidence of the participation of women in this movement from this area. Therefore, we met some veteran women activist and feminist leaders who have provided us some fruitful insights on the role of women of Nalbari in the freedom movement, especially in the Quit India Movement of 1942. As is evident from available information, there was no front line woman leader from this area, but it would be incorrect to say that women did not play any significant role in the freedom movement. Women mostly took part in the movement indirectly or from behind the screen. Nevertheless women directly or indirectly took active part in this movement.

After independence, women of Nalbari played a remarkable role in different mass movement. In this respect mention may be made about role of women in the peasant movement which was popularly known as '*Adhiar Andolan*' organized by Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) immediately after independence. It was the result of the influence of peasant upsurge of Telengana region of Andhra in 1949. The RCPI organized the rural people of some parts of Nalbari against the landlords. However, the RCPI was declared illegal by the government in 1950 because of its faith on arms struggle. The people of Nalbari, specially the people of Belsor area which is situated at the western part of Nalbari, was fully involved with this movement. A section of women of Belsor area also actively participated in this movement under the leadership of Kamala Medhi (later Barman) and Bhutuni Abu. They formed progressive women's association (*Pragatishil Nari Sangh*) and rushed to different parts of Nalbari to organize the women. Some of them were arrested by the police and sent to jail. They were Giribala Barman, Kamala Medhi, Fatema Bibi, Bhutuni Abu, and Kanaklata Medhi. The educated women of Nalbari were highly influenced by this movement (Sarma 2005:539-540). Thus, the progressive Women's Association, influenced largely by the leftist ideology, had a deep rooted impact on the minds of women of this area in creating political awareness.

The women of Nalbari also actively participated in the Language movement (1962), Refinery movement (1967), Medium movement (1967) etc. but their participation in the Assam movement on foreigner issue (1979-1985) was special and impressive. During this movement a large portion of women of Nalbari had thrown out their normal duty of housekeeping and openly came out on the street to participate in different programmes of the movement, like – bandha, picketing, road blockade, mass curfew, mass rally, black out etc. During this movement they acted as part of All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Asom Gana Sangram Parishad, the two major organizations that led the movement. Thus, it was for the first time that a large number of women of Nalbari were involved in political activities which evinced political consciousness in their minds and also made them gender

sensitive. Significantly a section of women of Nalbari area has been actively involved with the armed movement of ULFA and National Democratic Front Of Bodoland (NDFB) as supporters, armed cadre and even as central leaders, who are demanding Sovereign Assam and Sovereign Bodoland respectively. In this connection we may mention the name of Mrs. Pranati Deka who was a central leader of ULFA (now they are in discussion table with central government of India). Thus, the participation of women of Nalbari District in the mass movement and different agitations since the time of independence is significant.

We have already mentioned that Nalbari was declared a district on 14th August, 1985. Prior to this, Nalbari was a sub-division of Kamrup district. At that time there was no important women leader who had taken part in the electoral politics. Some of the educated women of Nalbari, especially women from urban areas, were mainly involved with women's organizations like *Asom Pradesh Mahila Samity*. Its activities were mainly centered on the socio-economic development instead of political interest of women. Since the inception of Nalbari as a district, the participation of women of the district in the electoral politics of Assam also slowly increased. In the assembly election held in 1985, Rekha Rani Das Bodo was elected from Barama Legislative Assembly Constituency (at that time Barama LAC was a part of Nalbari district). She was one of the frontline women leaders of the Assam movement. She also took charge of the Social Welfare Minister in the State Cabinet. Another women leader who was elected twice to the Assam Legislative Assembly from Nalbari LAC is Dr. Alaka Desai Sarma. It is notable that she was the wife of former cabinet minister of Assam late Nagen Sarma who was killed by ULFA extremist in the year 2000. Another women leader from the district who has been playing an active role in the state politics is Dr. Malaya Barman. She was the president of the Assam State women wing of the Indian National Congress and was elected to 12th Assam Legislative Assembly in 2006 from Patacharkuchi LAC, an adjoining LAC of Nalbari district.

Participation in the electoral politics as voters by the women of Nalbari is not far behind the male voters. In the 14th Assembly election held in 2016 the women voters outnumbered the male voters. Here, it would be important to closely look into the participation of women in politics as voters. This aspect can be observed in the following table which reflects women's involvement in electoral politics as voters.

Women Voters of the District in the LAC Election Held in 2001-2016

| Assembly Election | % of Women Voters | % of Male Voters | Total Percentage |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 2001 | 75.00 | 80.01 | 7.62 |
| 2006 | 74.44 | 75.07 | 74.70 |
| 2016 | 84.81 | 84.64 | 84.72 |

Source: District Election Office, Nalbari District

The scenario of participation of women in active politics of local governance has drastically changed after the 73rd & 74th amendment of Indian Constitution. Already it has

mentioned that one-third reservation has been given to women in local government bodies like panchayati raj institutions and municipal bodies. It has increased to fifty percent in Assam. As a result nearly thousand of women of Nalbari district also have got opportunity to participate in panchayat and municipal bodies as a member and president. Definitely, this participation has widened the political awareness of women.

Conclusion: In this article we have tried to analyze the participation in politics by the women of Assam in general and Nalbari district in specific from two angles – participation in different mass movements and participation in electoral politics. We found that since the time of freedom struggle the women have been playing vital role in different mass movements organized on various general as well as special issues. The same trend is going on till date. The participation of women in politics as voters is also impressive. The rate of women voters almost equal to the rate of men voters in accordance with the record of participation in the past elections. However, the number of women participating in electoral politics as candidates is far less than male counterpart. The number of women elected from Assam to parliament and state legislative assembly is too less which does not exceed ten percent. The constitutional reservation of seats in local bodies by 73rd & 74th amendment has provided ample opportunity to women to participate in active local politics equal with men. It has strengthened the arguments of the reservation of seats for women in Loksabha and State Assemblies the proposal of which are pending in Parliament due to the strong opposition of some political parties like Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Samajbadi Party (SP) etc. The ruling parties of central government also have not been showing strong will to pass the legislation to provide reservation to women in representative bodies.

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