

Issues and Challenges of Tribal Women in Assam: Political Scenario

Mabrur Ahmed

Research Scholar, Dept of Political Science and Public Administration, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu (India)

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Corresponding Author

Email: mabrurahmedcool786[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Women's human rights are inalienable, indivisible, and integral part of the universal human rights. The equal and full participation of women in political sphere at the national as well as international level and reduction of all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex are the priority objectives of the international community. The constitution of India itself provides for women significant position in the socio-political life of the Nation by ensuring universal adult franchise, representation in political bodies, right to property, equal pay for equal work and right to equality. However, in practice women do not enjoy all these rights and are still struggling for them. In this paper, the author is trying to emphasise that women made progress in the State politics of Assam. The main issue of this article is to focus on, to identify the Political Issues and Challenges of tribal women in Assam.

1. Introduction

There is no profession or institution into which women have not entered. We find girls not only in the general educational institutions like the universities but also in professional colleges like Medical Engineering and Veterinary. Yet they do not occupy a position of equality with men in every profession. The progress of women, both in politics and education is unsatisfactory. Custom, tradition and society have been and continue to be the great obstacles in the way of their progress. Decision making, both in politics and administration is men possess the dominant position.

The Government of India Act, 1935, provided women representative facility by reservation of a seat in the Legislative Assembly of Assam from the constituency of Shillong, because there was greater number of women in that constituency than in any other. The Act also granted women to contest election not only for the reserved seat but the general seats also. Two women had contested in the reserved seat of 1937. Miss Mavis Dunn and Ka Berlina Diengdoh and. Both of them contested as independent candidates. The women voters were excited because they were having an opportunity for the first time in their life to participate in the decision making. There were women voters in the Shillong constituency. Of them 1,228 or 55.84 percent of the voters exercised their franchise. Miss Mavis Dunn polled 938 votes.¹ Thus, for the first time, in the political history of Assam, one woman became a part of the Legislative Assembly. But no woman contested a general seat though thirteen general seats were won by women in the Legislative Assembly of the Uttar Pradesh. Though no woman contested a general seat in Assam, one lady Mrs. Sururichi Bala Roy Ghoshurthy contested the Sylhet East general seat in the Assam Legislative Council (Upper House) against four male rivals. She was the 'first Bengali Hindu lady to contest for a seat in the Legislative Council. But she polled only 37 out of 406 votes polled and therefore lost the security deposit.

2. Methodology

This study relies mostly on information gathered from secondary sources such as government reports, journals,

books, case studies, articles, research papers, news papers and reliable websites. Descriptive-Historical method has been used in this research paper. This study also tries to suggest new measures and policies to be implemented for the betterment and progress of tribal women in electoral politics.

3. Statement of the Problem

In society, change occurs in the natural process of social evolution. It may be prompt, if the society raises an internal dynamism circling all spheres of the culture. Such indigenous change may be enduring as it gets recovered by exogenous concern and continual renewal. Moreover, change may be gradual, even imperceptible, if it apprehends stagnated by socially containing inertia which thwarts internal arrests progress and dynamism. In the context of Assam, which contains 12.41 per cent of tribal population as against 8.19 per cent for the country, the situation of social change as well as for that matter social development among the tribes is even more disappointing. In addition, the tribal groups with diverse ethnic origin representing racial stocks from Proto-Australoids to Mongoloids with a distinctive cultural and social system, own cultural ethos, unique way of acceptance to different ecological nook and a peculiar social structure of their own, appear to respond to social change process quite differently and in different orders. Thus, the pace of social variation among the tribal women in the state varies significantly from one area to another and also socially from one group to another.

4. Historical Background

Since 1946, there were six general elections.³ The last general election to the Legislative Assembly of Assam under the 1935, Government of India Act, was held in 1946. The first General election to the Assam Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha (The House of the People) was held in 1952, the Second in 1957, the third in 1962, the fourth in 1967, the Mid Term election to the House of the People in 1971, the Fifth General Election to the Legislative Assembly in 1972, the 6th General Election to Lok Sabha in 1977 and the 6th General Election to the Legislative Assembly in 1978. As we have already noted only three women contested for a seat in the

Legislative Assembly of Assam and Assam Legislative Council before 1946. Since 1946, however, there was an increase in the number of women contesting elections, though their number was not substantial and not in proportion to their population strength. We shall study women's role in the electoral politics of Assam. It may be noted, in this connection, that the Legislative Council of Assam was abolished and election were held for the election of members to the Legislative Assembly of Assam. Women's number that contested the general election of 1946 was five. They were Bonniely Khongmen, Mavis Dunn, T. W. Shadap, Berlina Diengdoh and Padmakumari Gohain. Bonniely Khongmen was nominated by the Congress and the rest contested as Independents. The first four contested the seat reserved for women in Shillong. Padmakumari Gohain contested the general seat. Padmakumari Gohain was the first Assamese lady to contest a general seat in the plains of Assam. Before she offered herself as an independent candidate she was a Municipal Commissioner, Dibrugarh Municipal Board and acquired some practical experience in politics. In order to play a greater role in State politics she contested the Dibrugarh (West) constituency. She had to face three male rivals, Bijoy Chandra Saikia set up by Congress, Purna Dutta (independent) and Ghana Kanta Gogoi (Alio m Association). Padmakumari Gohain polled only 839 votes out of 8,018 votes polled. Her male rival Bijoy Chandra Saikia polled 5030 votes. Therefore Padmakumari Gohain was not only defeated, her security deposit was also lost.

For the reserved seat for women at Shillong, there were four candidates as we have already noted. Bonniely Khongmen nominated by Congress was elected by an absolute majority of the votes polled. Khongmen polled 1454 votes out of 2,878 votes polled. Khongmen before her election had no experience in practical politics. She was a Headmistress of a High School in Shillong.

The 1st general election under the present constitution was held in 1952. There was a slight improvement of women's number who contesting the general election. Six women filed nominations. Of them four were from the plains districts of Assam as well as two from hill district of Khasi and Jaintia. Padmakumari Gohain, who contested unsuccessfully in 1946, again contested from the Moran constituency in 1952, as an independent candidate. Her former rival Bijoy Chandra Saikia who defeated her in 1946 also contested same seat. But in 1952, Padmakumari Gohain defeated Bijoy Chandra Saikia by polling 5,757 votes more. But both of them were defeated by Ghana Kanta Gogoi, who polled the highest number of votes; he polled an absolute majority of votes polled 10,221 out of 20,374 votes polled. Though Padmakumari Gohain was defeated by Ghana Kanta Gogoi she had the psychological satisfaction of not only defeating her former rival but also for polling greater number of votes this time than on the previous occasion.

The second woman to contest the 1952 general election was Raja Bala Das. She was nominated by Congress to contest from the Gauhati constituency. She was Principal of the Handiqui Girls College, Gauhati and no practical experience in politics. She had to contest against three powerful rivals,

Hem Barua of the Socialist Party, Gaurishanker Bhattacharyya of the Communist Party and Jagadish Medhi of the K. M. P. P. There was a neck to neck race between Bhattacharyya and Raja Bala Das and the former was elected by a small margin of 213 votes. Raja Bala Das polled 5292 votes and Bhattacharyya 5505 out of 16,829 valid votes polled. Thus Bhattacharyya was elected by a minority vote.

Jyotsna Chanda was the third woman to contest the 1952 general election from the Silchar constituency as a Congress candidate. She was the wife of the late Arun Kumar Chanda. She had to face seven rivals. Of the seven Mchrab Ali Laskar was the most powerful. Here also there was keen contest between Mrs. Chanda and Laskar. Laskar was elected by a very small majority of 48 votes. Mrs. Chanda filed a case against her rival and the Election Tribunal set apart the election of Laskar and declared Mrs. Chanda as being elected.

Thus, in 1972, 12 women contested the election to the Legislative Assembly. Of them eight were set up by Congress, and two independents. Of the 12 only 8 were successful. Of the 8 only two were elected by a majority vote. All others were elected by a minority vote.

5. Membership of parliament

Before 1952, no woman from the whole of North East India was elected to the Central Legislature. For the first time, two ladies, Bonniely Khongmen and Rani Manjula Devi contested for a seat in Lok Sabha, the House of the people. Bonniely Khongmen was a member of the Legislative Assembly of Assam from 1946 to 1952. In 1952, she was nominated by the Congress for the seat reserved for the Hill Tribes, Khongmen had to contest against two rivals, Donaldson Basan and Wilson Reade. Khongmen polled 52,326 votes out of 1,09, 663 votes polled. Thus she was elected by an absolute majority votes polled. The second woman to contest the Lok Sabha elections in 1952 was Rani Manjula Devi as an independent candidate, from the Goalpara-

Garo Hills constituency. She had to face five rivals and was defeated by Amjad Ali.

6. Ministership

During the period, 1921 to 17 November 1939, there was no lady member in the Assam Cabinet. When Muhammad Saadulla formed his third Ministry on 17 November 1939, he included Mavis Dunn as a part of his ministry on 5 December 1939. She continued to be a minister of the Saadulla Cabinet till 25 December 1941. When Saadulla formed his fourth Ministry on 25 August 1942, Mavis Dunn was again included in the cabinet and continued to be a minister till 23 March 1945, she was dropped when Saadulla formed his fifth ministry. From 23 March 1945 till 22 April 1957, no woman was included in any ministry. On 22 April 1957, Bishnuram Medhi appointed Usha Borthakur as a Deputy Minister. Usha Borthakur went out of office when Bishnuram Medhi resigned on 28 December 1957. From 28 December 1957 till 23 April 1966, there was no woman in the Ministry. On 23 April 1966 Kamal Kumari Barua was appointed a Minister of State. Thus Kamal Kumari Barua was the third lady Minister.

7. Women in the Politics of Assam

Assam has a glorious history about women's role in the politics. Princesses Rajyamati and Amritprabha from the ancient Assam exercised their influence in the politics and administration of their dynastic consorts. Queen of Sadhani actively participated in the politics and play role as an advisor to her husband in the Sadiya's Chutiya Kingdom. In the reign of Ahom, women occupied remarkable position in the political sphere. The Ahom king's chief queen Tao-Khamthi (1380-89); Chao-Ching was accomplished consort of the Ahom king ngbakla(1539-52) and Gabharu Suklenmung, the wife of Tao-mung Bargohain played active roles in the political field. The chief consort of the Ahom king Siva Singha, (1714-44) Bar-rajya Phuleswari, was the 1st queen of Assam whogoverned the kingdom directly. Phuleswari's successor Sarbeswari and Ambika governed the kingdom. Prominent Women like Jaymati, Rangili, Mula Gabharu, Padumi Ramani and Gabharu were politically sensible women and scarified their life. Rukmini and Radha were in the 1st line of the prominent Mayamariya rebellion which was against the then Ahom government.

The lack of significance of political parties and the negative attitude of party leaders, lack of opportunity and low female literacy low women population, low information level and economic inequality, lack of confidence and female insecurity, lack of the ability to communicate with public and burden of domestic work, lack of proper training and the lack of empowerment among women, are the barred assamese women to take actively participate in the mainstream politics despite having interest in it. Assamese women were unable to possess major positions in political parties of the state, except one or two. Most of the parties do not groom women towards power. Women's space has been fixed to family connections rather than commitment and convictions.

Women are only allowed if there is no alternative option. Women are only considered if there is any reservation provision. The number of successful female politicians in the State also clearly reflects that common people are not in favour to bring women in power.

Student politics is an important feature in Assam politics. The major student's organizations produce about 50% of the future political leaders. Even these bodies pay little attention in women's participation in politics.

Scanty involvement of the Assamese women in the electoral process has kept them marginalized in the power politics. Women should be in a good number in the power politics, so that they can show their issues. The constitution of India ensures people's right to participate in the political sphere without any difference and it also does not matter whatever the sex is. The entering channels into Parliament or Assembly are same for both women and men. The election is an instrument of a democratic country through which people can take part in the decision making process of its government. Through this process, Assamese women can enter into the power politics and can bring fair and equal treatment all.

8. Challenges and Issues of Women in the Political Participation

Women's measurement in the participation in politics is based on voting rate and election to legislature is easy, relatively. The main challenge is to estimate the real participation of women in the decision making process.

9. Participation as a Proxy Candidate

There have been testimonies that the lack of reservation policy, different women got elected, but their role is merely as the mouth-piece of their male family members. This show that there is lots of possibility of on-roll women's participation to be the higher than what it actually exists on local level. Awareness programs and increase in female education is now taking care of such happenings and women active participation is on an increase. Still there is a need to record data at a more micro level so that women who only act as a proxy can be identified.

10. Measurement of decision making initiatives

The quantitative data of women's participation in the politics of local level is available but the data on the aspects of their passive participation along with the utilization of the decision-making process functionality provided to women is not being properly quantified. Although, the legislature has enabled their large presence into the affairs of the state, but their worthy essence into the system is yet to be founded at most of the areas. The real data on their sensitization about their rights and its usage is still missing. Efforts can be made to capture the performance of women in debates, initiative in brining legislation and participation in other aspects of the democratic process.

Women's participation and representation in the politics of Assam itself is a big matter, the issue of Muslim women's participation, tribal women and the tea garden women are another part of the issue. The Muslim population of the state has considerable percentage (34.2%, Census 2011), tribal population and the tea garden population have less women's representation in active politics. Today, 33 percent reservation in the Panchayat level has been increased Assamese women's participation in the grassroot bodies, but lack of the low representation and the participation of women in the political spheres of Assam in the last Lok Sabha election show a low representation rate in the both houses of Parliament as well as in State Assembly. Women's representations average percentage in Parliament, and Assemblies as well as the Council of Ministers taken together has been approximately 15 percent in India, but Assamese women have posses low representation. In the mean Lok Sabha there are 14 MPs from Assam, and only 1 is the female MP (7.14%); And out of 7 MPs in the Rajya Sabha, there is only 1 female MP (14.3%). There are 126 MLAs in the State Legislative Assembly and women's number is 14 (11.1%). But of we compared to its neighboring States, Assam posses a good position in terms of women's representation in the field of politics.

11. Suggestions to improve political status of women

Following suggestions were observed more effective for women's participation in politics. Education plays a key role fasting greater social participation. Education helps the women to develop a sense of motivation to achieve more.

- Encouraging self esteem of Women and Girls so that they are able to reach the decision making levels.
- Political training of women should begin school stage and should be speed on the local provincial National and inter-National levels.
- Sensitize and make women conscious of their right and power to vote.
- Women should fight for their right to progress in politics.
- Women need to be helped to raise their voice.
- Women should be inspired and motivated to think discuss and act to solve problems by Political leaders.
- Showing transparency and gender balance in the selection process.
- Providing greater sensitive training to women to have no discriminatory and balanced relationship.
- Developing mechanisms and training to encourage women's participation in the electoral and political processes.
- Women moreover need to be actively involved in defining the political, economic and social agenda. A large scale grass roots movement must be initiated to change the perceptions and attitude of both decision makers and voters.

The entry of women in the politics will transform the total scenario. From the maximum educate a man and you educate a man only, educate a women and you educate a family. We can say that if we will be able to make at least one woman politically aware we will be able to sensitize many people about these issues.

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12. Recommendations

The investigator on the basis of her experience and findings of the study recommends studies in the following areas:-

- Similar study can be come out to find out the role of women politicians.
- A comparative study can be conducted on the opinion of politically active men and women regarding women's low participation in politics.
- Qualitative studies to know about women in politics.

13. Conclusions

This paper found that women need political empowerment so that women can demonstrate their abilities outside the house itself and should be given equal status by eliminating gender discrimination with them. Under the constitution of many countries, women have the right to political, socio-economic equality. This right should be implemented by giving them the real form and those countries where there are no equal rights, such laws should be created and learn from developed countries that women are no less than others. We have found that illiteracy has also become a barrier to women's path. Women are not able to use their rights properly due to education. The government should arrange to educate women. In fact, changes in the lives of ordinary people are necessary; to change their thinking and change their status by transforming the lives of women can be an emancipation of women