



## **Political Leadership and Gender Gap in Holding Power and Positions: Reflections from Assam**

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### ***Abstract***

*Independence movement witnessed the participation of Assamese women in a large number, but, their visibility in the institutions of post-independence period is somewhat limited. Keeping this at the backdrop, the paper discusses gender gap in the decision-making bodies and key public institutions of Assam. The committee which was formed to submit the report on the clause 6 of Assam Accord was a male dominated body where there was not a single woman present. Consequently, the report was devoid of any provisions for women which constitute half of the population of the state. In that context, how far the voice of women will be represented in the policy making arenas? How do patriarchal practices reshape its form in the public domain and changes the dynamics of representation in the public institutions?*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, Gender Quota, Representation, Women, Clause 6 Report, Assam Accord.*

### **Introduction**

In a democracy, the representation of diverse groups and communities enriches the essence of democratic values. So, political representation of different groups in a society is required for accommodative and inclusive society. The study explores the issues of political representation of women in the legislative institutions and other decision making bodies in the context of Assam. The study looks at the participation of women in various political movements, their role and the contemporary status of women within the decision making bodies of Assam. For instance, the study brings the issues of gender representation in the clause 6 report of Assam Accord.

### **Globally, the Gender issue**

As per Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the every individual has the right to participate in the government of their country. For smooth functioning of democracy, equal access to power, decision-making and leadership by both men and women

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at all levels is a necessary requirement. However, the exclusion of women from the power and decision making process has been evident. Has there been equal participation of men and women in political sphere, the government would have been more representative in nature, more transparent and accountable towards the policy concerns of women.

The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides the basis for realising equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life, including the right to vote and to stand for election, as well as to hold public office at all levels of government (Article 7). States parties agree to take all appropriate measures to overcome historical discrimination against women and obstacles to women's participation in decision-making processes (Article 8), including legislation and temporary special measures (Article 4). Regarding the poor execution of Article 7 and 8 of the Convention, the committee on the elimination of discrimination against women put forward some general recommendations to the government after reviewing the challenges to women's participation in public space and political life. The recommendation consists of adopting temporary special measures as per Article 4 of the Convention.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, pointed out the continuing disparity in decision making between men and women. One of the twelve critical areas of concern identified by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is women's unequal share of power and decision making. The Platform for Action specifies specific steps to guarantee women's full involvement in power structures and equitable access to those structures, as well as to improve women's abilities to take part in decision-making and leadership. In order to attain women's full and equal involvement in decision-making processes, it was recommended in the Agreed Conclusions 1997/2 of the Commission on the Status of Women's 41st session that the Beijing Platform for Action be put into action more quickly. Among other things, governments were asked to ensure gender mainstreaming in legislation and to set time-bound goals for achieving gender balance in decision-making. The agreed-upon conclusions emphasise the significance of ensuring equal involvement in decision-making for advancing democracy.

As a result of the global initiative, India also committed to build a gender just society through the local self-governments in the grass roots level. India through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the constitution granted the 33% reservation for women in the village councils. This initiative has significantly helped in deepening the democracy by decentralizing the power towards the local community and women. However, the literature suggests that the initiative has been facing challenges in the objectives of empowering women as an independent agents in the political domain thereby in the social process. Therefore, the gender quota initiatives leave some uncertain queries in internalizing empowerment of the women in sharing power as well as operationalizing legitimate power in the political domain.

## Setting the Context

The participation of Assamese women during the freedom movement was massive. Looking at the women's participation in the civil disobedience movement, the prominent historian of Assam, Benudhar Sarma called it as a women's movement. Around fifteen lives of women in Assam got martyred to the cause of India's freedom. During the Satyagraha movement in 1919 or the 1942 uprising, women were organised as a part of the freedom movement and that led to the formation of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti. Chandra Prabha Saikiani, Amal Prabha Das were leading the feminist at that point of time. Saikiani, who had opposed the patriarchal practices within structure and questioned the subordinated roles or the spaces assigned to the female activist. There was a meeting in Nagaon where a system of panda or screen segregated men and women. She protested against the system of panda and said that we are equal partner. So, they considered themselves as citizens who fought for their freedom and save their mother land from the British.<sup>†</sup> When all these were over they became citizens in the hands of a merciful state. Earlier they were the forefront and after getting independence, all the women were sidelined. Women were no longer seen on the table of discussion, holding power at their hand and in decision making bodies. So, the post-independence period has witnessed women in a marginalised section, who were sidelined from the domain of power structure.

In the post-colonial period of Assam, the women got involved in the various political and civil movements such as the language movement (1960), the refinery movement (1967), the medium movement (1972) and the movement on the outsiders (bohiragoto). Simultaneously, women from various ethnic communities have been actively engaged in the autonomy movements of Assam. The resistance movement against the Citizenship Amendment Bill as well as Act (2019) was participated by women in large numbers. Despite having such an active participation, women were always outsiders while it comes to the process of peace talks, sharing power and holding positions. It can be observed that at the initial stage women were insider and at the final stage they become the outsider and were wiped out from the scenario itself. The peace negotiation process in Assam never recognized any women stakeholder be it in the time of signing Assam Accord or any of the Bodo Accords.

Anowara Taimur is the only female chief minister from December 1980 to June 1981. In Assam, the proportion of women have never exceeded 11% in Legislative Assembly. The highest percentage of women were elected to the thirteenth assembly, i.e 11% in the year 2013. In fourteenth assembly, only 8 women were elected in 2016 whereas it went down to 6 women member in the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Assembly. This can be called as democratic deficit where the women constituted half of the population of the state but the percentage of women representation till today in the Assembly has not been more than 11%. The table 1 below has shown the number of women contested in the election, the number of constituency and the women elected from the 1st to 15th Assam Legislative Assembly.

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<sup>†</sup>Interview was taken in the month of October, 2020

Table: Number of Women contested and elected candidates in Assam Assembly Election

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	89	8
2021-XV	126	76	6

Source: (Statistical Report on the Legislative Election: Election Commission of India, 2016 and Data from the website of National Election Watch accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2022.)

As shown in the Table from 1951 to 1983, both the contested women candidates and the elected ones were less in number. From the 1990 onwards there was an increase in the number of women contesting from different constituencies. However, the result remained the same. Though the contesting number had been increasing from the 2001 onwards, the number of winning candidates did not get increase, it remained the same. In the recent 2021 Assembly election, the total women candidates was 76 and 6 women were elected which is only 5% of the total 126 candidates. As per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj Institutions, Assam along with 20 other states has increased the quota and made 50% reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. In Assam, the total number of representatives in the Panchayati Raj institutions is 26,754 (Source: [www.pnrd.assam.gov.in](http://www.pnrd.assam.gov.in) accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2022) and the out of that number of women is 14,609 which 54% of the total candidates. The initiative of increasing the gender quota by the Assam government has influenced the participation of women in the local level. But, the quota initiative has not resulted in the

visible presence of women in institutions other than the panchayat institutions. There has been allegation of reinforcing the patriarchal norms through the local governments both in rural as well as urban areas of Assam. Some of the instances are women holding the position of chairperson and other positions, they are more inclined towards their family decisions or whatever their husbands ask to perform. There are other instances where the party used the women as their puppets. One of the respondents, who is a female elected candidate said, “*I used to do whatever my party wants me to do in our area.*”<sup>‡</sup> These reflects that though 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment help women to empower them politically, the social structure and patriarchal norms and party obligation hinder them to fully utilize their institutional position. Omvedt (2005) in the context of governance and reservation for women in India mentioned that quota system does not alone change the position of women.

One of the female respondents, who is a women activist from Assam said, “*In Assam, as we have seen since Independence, there is no female political leaders as such. There was a tendency of assisting the boys during the Assam Agitation.*” According to her, “*women came out to support the boys to play their role as mothers and sisters*”<sup>§</sup>. Rather than taking a leading role, women merely were a part of the political process.

The scholarship suggests in the context of women’s preference for activism over the participation in the formal political structure in Scotland is due to the time consuming nature and the time bound activities in the formal political structure. Many women are reluctant to make time for formal commitments because of their domestic and maternal responsibilities (Martlew, Forrester, & Buchanan, 1985). In addition, women encounter difficulties as a result of the patriarchal bias in the structure and execution of the political system (ibid). The nature work due to double burden or the triple burden (work place, domestic work and politics) are universal for women as category irrespective of place. As a result of this rigid nature of work and time table, there is a less visibility of women in the political institutions of Assam.

The literature on gender and politics mapped some of the informal practices within the political party that favours male dominance and goes against the female candidates (Bjarnegard & Kenny, 2016; Kenny & Verge, 2016; Piscopo, 2016). Some of the examples are men performing gendered rituals within the party meeting and dominating conversations in the gender balanced bodies (Verge & De la Fuente, 2014, p. 73), women being subjected to super surveillance and facing the doubts about their competencies, women who do not agree to the party norms and show their assertiveness are often removed from the key positions within the party (Verge & De la Fuente, 2014, p. 73; Kenny, 2013). The party prefers to give nomination to the candidate on the basis of their criteria of win ability. Again getting a party ticket to contest the election is another deal for women. These informal practices within the party system need to be reformed. The gender quota by the political parties are also advocated to increase the women in politics.

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<sup>‡</sup> The interview was taken place in the month of December, 2020

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## **Exclusion of Women as Category in the Clause 6 Report of Assam Accord**

Assam accord plays a crucial role in the contemporary politics of Assam. It is the byproduct of six years of Assam Movement. The women participation in Assam Movement was immense. The Clause 6 is a part of the Assam Accord. The Clause 6 committee has made a consensus over defining who is an Assamese in the state of Assam and who is going to enjoy the administrative, legislative and constitutional rights in Assam. How can without a single women the decision making body can be constituted for having important decisions in Assam where the male and female population is equally distributed. As per 2011 census, the total population of Assam is 31,205,576 of which male and female are 15,939,443 and 15,266,133 respectively. So how can we see the discourse of universal right of women in Assam? How long the power structure will be dominated by men in post truth age?

By referring to this context, the paper examines how did the absence of women stakeholder in the decision making body influence the report of the Clause 6 of Assam Accord? Why it was important to keep women in the decision making body of the Clause 6 of Assam Accord. The paper explores how the absence of women in the decision-making bodies exclude their interest into the execution process?

## **High Powered Committee on Clause 6 of Assam Accord and the Gender Discourse**

The Centre appointed a high powered committee to implement the clause number 6 of Assam Accord headed by former Hon'ble Judge of Gauhati High Court Justice Biplap Kumar Sharma. The report proposed January 1951 as the cut-off date in identifying any Indian citizen as an Assamese to implement the clause 6 of Assam Accord. The report suggested on the issues related to land, ownership of land, linguistic, cultural and social rights and the protection of resources of Assam. The sixteen membered committee did not seem to be an inclusive one. There was not a single women visible in the committee. As a result it is observed that not a single provision of the report addressed the issues of Assamese women in terms of political reservation, economic as well as social rights in the state. Annie Philips argues that politics of idea can only be reflected when the idea of presence is available in the implementing process. The non-inclusion of gendered voice led women to a marginalized category. I am bringing a few extraction from the report and here we can see how the narratives are being defined in terms of preservation of rights for Assamese people.

### ***Land and Land Rights***

The report says that implementing the Assam Accord will be a futile exercise without protecting the land rights along with the political rights. In terms of ownership of land in the state, the rights are confined to the Assamese People putting restrictions on transferring the same by any means to other persons other than Assamese People.

### ***Economic Rights***

The Committee suggests amendment of Article 371B in order to ensure that 80–100% of Group C and D level positions in the central government, semi-central government, central PSUs, private sector, including under PPP mode falling and arising in Assam should be reserved for Assamese people. Additionally, the report stated that Assamese citizens will be

given preference for 80 to 100% of employment held by Government of Assam and State Government corporations, as well as 70 to 100% of openings created by public private partnerships in the State of Assam.

### ***Political Reservation***

In terms of political reservation, the committee provided recommendations. They advocated that between 80 and 100 percent of the seats in Parliament assigned to the State of Assam be reserved for Assamese citizens (p.56, 72). The committee has suggested reserving 80–100% of the seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly and Local Bodies for Assamese citizens, including any existing reservations. Local bodies other than Sixth Schedule Councils will be subject to the same reservation (p.50). In the context of creation of Upper House, the committee recommends the making of adequate provision for an Upper House (Legislative Council of Assam) and all seats thereof to be reserved for the Assamese People. The SC, ST, and tribes/communities of the State shall make up the House's membership (seats allotted as per the proportionate population of each tribe on rotational basis). It would be essential to revise the current Article 371 B of the Indian Constitution in order to adopt the Committee's recommendations (pages 51, 67, and 127, Annexure V).

By looking at the key recommendations of the committee, it can be said that there is no provision for women in providing economic rights, land rights and political reservation. While mentioning about the creation of upper council, the reservation are made to all the category of the society except the women. The provisions for women would create equality of opportunity in the formal realm as well as a necessary step to readdress the situation of women. However, the committee has mentioned repeatedly about the Assamese people, but within the Assamese community there is no clear cut specification as much in terms of gender. In superficial level, this seems to be a normal affair. But by denying rights to the women of Assam who constitutes half of the population of the state has been violating the principles of social justice.

When group rights are being negotiated between cultural groups and the liberal state, the women of that group must be consulted. In the context of providing group rights, Okin argues that the inequalities within the pertinent groups should be given special attention, specially inequalities between the sexes, which are often less easily discernible, because they are less public than other inequalities (Okin 1999a:23, 1998:634-4).

In mediating conflicts, Devaux suggested for a democratic, pluralist and a political approach in liberal democracies. Through the growth of democratic contestation sites and the formal participation of women in the decision-making process, women who are part of cultural groups have a direct voice in these issues. She prefers democratic deliberation of political kind rather than an ideal and ethical model so that the various voices are heard (Devaux, 2000). For a gender-neutral outcome there should be the mandate of gender-inclusive criteria for each delegation participating in a peace process. Women's inclusion is of utmost importance at early stages and throughout peace and post-conflict recovery processes. Moreover, gender mainstreaming should also go hand in hand along with the quota

approach which aims to transform the organisation process and practices by eliminating gender biases.

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