

Bishnupriya Manipuri Women in the Electoral Politics of Assam: An analysis



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Abstract

The goal of political empowerment of women in India and Assam in particular could be achieved only when women from all communities have equal and effective participation in electoral politics without any discrimination on artificial grounds. However, so far as political participation and representation is concerned in spite of having equal political rights, the presence of women in Indian Parliament as well as State Legislatures is abysmally low. In case of Assam which represents mini India with its multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic society, the political status of women is no better than the Indian women. Though in local bodies the representation of women in Assam has reached up to 50% from 2013 due to the reservation policy but they neither could hold good position in decision making process nor play lead role in party politics of the state. When it comes to the participation and representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri community of Assam, the picture is even pathetic. Belonging to a microscopic linguistic minority community, Bishnupriya Manipuri women are double marginalized, one at the gender level and another at the community level. Under this background the present paper is an attempt to study the extent of participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in the electoral politics of Assam.

Keywords: Political Participation, Empowerment, Bishnupriya Manipuri Women, Assam.

Introduction

In contemporary time democracy has been regarded as the best form of government. Though the Greek political philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were critical of democracy but the fact is that in today's world there is no other alternative to democracy because people can enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties only under a democratic political system. However, democracy becomes consequential only when women, who constitute half of the human resource, could enjoy equal, effective and actual participation in all spheres including politics. This is because such kind of political participation will enable women to be a part in the decision making process leading to their development as well as empowerment. In fact political participation of women is an important socio-economic factor that helps to bring the development of a community within a society. Political participation is, however, not limited to casting vote only. In fact there are various conventional and un-conventional modes of political participation. The conventional modes includes voting, campaigning, taking membership of political party and voluntary organization, contesting for an election, making political contact individually or through group, while un-conventional modes indicates participation in strikes, protests, political demonstrations etc. However, the present study centers around voting and contesting elections and it tries to analyze the extent of participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in these modes of electoral politics of Assam. It seems very important to study the political status of Bishnupriya Manipuri women because it plays a significant role in their political empowerment on the one hand and development of their community on the other.

Review of Literature

There are a number of studies have been done till now on the political status and participation of women from which some of them seem important and thus reviewed for the present study.

Rainuka Dugar (Ed.), 1998 in her study pointed out that though women's representation becomes mandatory through 73rd & 74th Amendment Acts; their participation especially at the grass root level to articulate their demands and issues has been negligible. However, women by organizing themselves and forming groups can make these provisions a reality.

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1993 in his book mentioned that women in India, while constituting half of the total population, are very poorly represented in various policies and decision making bodies which so vitally influence their lives. It considered that increased involvement and participation of women in politics is a critical factor in bringing gender issues into the political agenda of the country.

Bhawana Jharta, 1998 analyses and evaluates the role and impact of family and education on women's participation in politics. It also seeks to explore how and to what extent these variables affect the nature and scope of women's participation in politics and determine the variation in their participatory level.

Kiran Saxena (Ed.), 2000 in her study mentioned that the presence of women in the political processes is most negligible. The book is an important contribution to the study as it explores women's struggles for political power, an important gesture through which women could achieve their rightful place in society. It also reflects their hardships, grief and sorrow, achievements and disappointments as well, and their success and failures in this battle.

N.D. Palmer, 1976 observed that men have voted more than women especially in rural areas and among low caste groups particularly in India where social conventions and taboos as well as relative levels of literacy have tended to keep women more aloof from public activities. According to him educated than uneducated, urban than rural women vote more actively.

Jaya Kothai Pillai, 1995 not only emphasizes the empowerment of women by highlighting their existing status and socio-economic development, but also discusses the strategies of empowerment especially the importance of the new roles for education. It concluded that women have to empower themselves by realizing their unequal representation in all sectors and must take initiative to change their inferior status.

S.K. Dikshit, 1992 pointed out that though there is lower participation by female in comparison to male electors throughout the country, but some states like Kerala, Manipur, Dadra, Delhi etc. have greater female turnout than that of male. It concludes that with the improvement of literacy percentage women's Participation in election activities and National politics is improving day by day and women are now conscious of their rights including electoral Participation.

Pradeep Kumar Sharma, 2000 makes an in depth study of the marginalized status of women and observes that if politics means power then women must achieve it by themselves through their own fight and struggle. He argues that the Dalit women

particularly, in order to get their equal recognition in social life, must fight against oppression, the caste system and male dominated patriarchal social structure in more active and vocal ways, firstly, by associating their movements with the large anti-caste Dalit Movements and secondly, by aligning themselves with the Feminist Movements.

Vibhuti Patel, 1993 mainly emphasizes the need for a long term strategies that will help in the process of strengthening women's influence on development policy, in enhancing political participation of women and in highlighting women's issues in decision making process.

Susheela Kaushik, 1993 also points out that at the panchayat levels and political parties, trade union and peasant movements as well as other political activities like campaigning, meetings, rallies etc. the participation of women is very marginal that needs to be expanded if it has to serve as a catchment's area for women in decision making levels and roles.

Dr. Pankaj Kumar, 2017 in his paper pointed out that political representation of women all over the world is very low. Even there are certain countries such as Arab countries, Yemen, Kuwait etc. where women's political representation is almost non-existent. Women have to face different problems and challenges and are not provided the responsibility to create their own nations. Therefore, for the real political empowerment of women which is the need of the hour, socio-economic and political rights must be implemented properly. Since illiteracy is a hindrance on the political empowerment of women, Govt. must take steps to educate women. Lastly there is a need to change the life style and thinking pattern of ordinary people to emancipate women.

Praveen Rai, 2017 mentioned that the trend of increasing level of voting participation of women that started in 1990s reached its highest in the 14th Lok Sabha election and also participation of women in campaigning shows substantial increase. In spite of that women are still underrepresented in legislative bodies and party hierarchies. Political parties never show efforts to mobilize women voters on the issues relating to women in either state or national level elections. The failure of women's Reservation Bill to pass in the parliament shows the harsh reality that political parties are not interested to take better account of increasing the electoral participation of women.

Shimelis kassa, 2015 aims to examine challenges and opportunities of women participation in politics of Ethiopia. The author mentioned that equal participation of women in decision making bodies and politics is not only essential for simple justice or democracy and sustainable development but also a precondition for the interests of women to be taken into account. Political participation allows women to address their basic needs and problems. Different factors such as socio-economic, cultural and religious are responsible for the poor political

participation and representation of women in the country.

Objective and Methodology

The main objective of the present paper is to examine the participation and representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in electoral politics of Assam. For this purpose a total number of 200 samples are selected from both rural and urban areas of Assam where substantial number of Bishnupriya Manipuri community reside through the technique of simple random sampling.

Data for the present study are collected through primary as well as secondary sources. Primary data is collected mainly with the help of schedule. In addition to this, extensive interviews were conducted with the respondents. Secondary data is collected by consulting books, journals and such other publications available at different libraries. Besides, internet resources have been accessed extensively. The study is limited to the Bishnupriya Manipuri community of Assam and no attempt is made to generalize other than the mentioned area.

Profile of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community is a microscopic linguistic minority community living in Assam since ages ago with its unique culture and language. Originally Bishnupriya Manipuris lived in the state of Manipur surrounding the villages of Loktak Lake and that is why they firmly identify themselves as the Manipuris. They trace their ancestry as the descendents of Babrubahana (son of Arjuna and Chitrangada, the daughter of the Gandharva king of Manipur). Thus, they claim to be the kshatriyas of the Aryan origin and believe that they were one of the earliest groups of immigrants in Manipur particularly in the villages surrounding the Loktak Lake. The Bishnupriya Manipuri society mainly consists of two sections viz. - Kshatriyas and Brhamins. However, their social stratification reveals that casteism is not very rigid and there is no such existence of Vaishyas or Sudras. Besides, there is no existence of social evils such as dowry, female infanticide, bride burning

etc. The Bishnupriya Manipuri society is subdivided into five groups or clans viz. - (1) Khamul (2) Moirang (3) Angom (4) Luwang, and (5) Mangang. They are collectively known as the Pancha-Bishnupriyas. The Bishnupriya Manipuri community is economically backward as their economy is primarily based on agriculture. Apart from agriculture, handicraft plays a significant role in the economy of this people. In fact the main occupation of women was handicraft such as spinning, weaving and the production of cloths including their traditional garments. Like Indian society, the Bishnupriya Manipuri society is also patriarchal in nature where male members possess the sole authority in all affairs. The women folk though always deserve an honorable position and in some occasions they are even treated as equal to male persons, but they are not considered as effective decision makers. They always have to fight for their equal rights and freedoms in decision making.

Data Analysis and major Findings of the study

In a democracy, voting is the most important and regularized political act that determines the sovereign will of the people. In a democracy participation in voting is a sign of the involvement of citizens in electoral process. Though voting does not require much knowledge, initiation and motivation, it assumes great importance and exerts a greater pressure and impact on electoral politics because it not only determines who holds elective office but also its results affect both the government as well as the electorate. The constitution of India guarantees voting right to every citizen of India who are 18 years of old irrespective of sex, color, caste, religion, language etc. In order to find out the extent of participation of women in voting, information has been sought from them by asking questions that whether they cast their vote in Panchayat, Assembly and Parliamentary elections. Besides, an attempt is also made to find out the extent of the influence of father/husband/other male family members on their voting choice and also the benefits they get from voting.

Table 1

Distribution of respondents by participation in voting

Voted in an election			Do you think voting gives any Benefit?		Any influence of males on voting	
Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Yes	No
194 (97%)	6 (3%)	200 (100%)	169 (87.1%)	25 (12.9%)	107 (55.2%)	87 (44.8%)

Source: Field work

The data in the Table 1 show that out of 200 women respondents, an overwhelming majority of women i.e. 194 (97%) have exercised their right of franchise while only 6 (3%) failed to cast their vote due either illness or out of station during election time etc. Thus, the participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in voting is quite praiseworthy. When the respondents are asked about to mention the election in which they cast their vote, it is found that majority of women i.e. 188(96.9%) cast their vote in Panchayat elections, which is followed by 174(89.7%) in Assembly and 163(84%) in Parliamentary elections. It indicates that voting participation is higher in Panchayat as compared to Assembly and

Parliamentary elections. This may be due to the fact that Panchayat elections are held at the local level where women are directly concerned about the election of their representatives and vice-versa and also it brings immediate benefits.

Besides, so far as the influence of males on voting is concerned, majority of women i.e. 107(55.2%) out of the total 194 respondents who have so far cast their vote in one or other election agree the influence of father/husband/other male family members on their voting choice, whereas 87(44.8%) deny the influence of the same. Further, when the respondents are asked about the benefits of their voting, majority of women i.e.169 (87.1%)

mentioned that they are benefited by voting be it assertion of identity as a woman as well as citizen of India or job assurance or monetary benefits. On the contrary only 25(12.9%) mentioned that voting does not provide any benefits to them.

Contesting election, on the other hand, is the most active as well as serious mode of political participation that requires interest and determination and also an adequate amount of time and efforts than

the other modes of political participation. In order to find out the nature of participation of women in elections an attempt is made to identify women who have so far contested one or the other election, the basis for contesting elections as well as the changes that have taken place in their status after contesting elections.

Table 2
Distribution of respondents by contesting elections

Have you contested for an election?			If yes which election?		
Yes	No	Total	Panchayat / Municipality	Assembly	Lok-Sabha
16 (8%)	184 (92%)	200 (100%)	16 (100%)	0	0

Source: Field work

An analysis of the data in the table 2 shows that only 16 (8%) out of the total 200 women respondents have contested for Panchayat elections, while there is no found woman who has so far contested for Lok Sabha or state Legislative Assembly elections. It thus, indicates that though the percentage of women contesting Panchayat elections is very insignificant but at least due to the reservation policy we can see women contesting elections at the local level, whereas it is none at the higher level. When the respondents who have so far contested elections are asked to mention the basis for contesting elections, it is found that along with reservation the other factors which motivated to contest elections are the persuasion of political parties 8 (50%), followed by 5(31.25%) own interest, 2(12.50%) inspiration of family/relatives and only 1(6.25%) inspiration of societal members and political leaders. It implies that persuasion or support of political parties seem to be an important factor for contesting elections. Besides, when the respondents are asked about the changes that have taken place in their status after contesting or winning elections, almost all of the women are of the view that now they get more respect from family as well as society and also can assert their position. Their family members now seek their opinion in taking any decision. Moreover, they can now take steps to protest against women's exploitation. It indicates that political participation in one or other way helps in the self assertion and empowerment of women.

The study thus reveals that the nature of political participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in Assam is not homogenous. It is found that participation of women in voting is quite praiseworthy i.e. 97%. However, voting is the simplest and periodic form of political participation where even politically least interested women are also mobilized to cast their right of franchise. Therefore, high voting turnout does not necessarily indicate high participation in other active and complex mode of political activities. When it comes to contesting election it is found that only 8% of women said that they have contested for an election that too at the Panchayat level elections only. There is no woman found who have so far contested for Assembly and parliamentary elections. It thus, indicates that political representation of

Bishnupriya Manipuri women is very negligible. Moreover, though the percentage of women in Panchayat elections is very insignificant but at least due to the reservation policy we can see women contesting elections at the local level, whereas it is none at the state and national level elections. Nevertheless the participation and representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women at the local bodies could not reach up to the reserved level i.e. 50% in Assam rather it is far behind it. This shows that Bishnupriya Manipuri women are very much marginalized and poorly represented in the political and decision making bodies which adversely effecting the overall development and empowerment of these women in particular and their community in general. The fact is that contesting election is the most complex political activity which is not simply a matter of choice rather conditioned by the influence of availability of funds, party support as well as opportunity and above all the interest of women. While the socio-economic variables of women have a great bearing on the nature and scope of their participation, the importance of other factors cannot be underestimated. Among these the most important factors are gender based role, internal fragmentation and the present vote bank politics.

The patriarchal nature of the Bishnupriya Manipuri society has fixed certain gender based duties i.e. the domestic and family responsibilities such as day to day domestic works, bearing and rearing children, looking after elderly persons on the shoulders of women which they have to do by hook or by crook. As a result it becomes very difficult for women to participate in political activities except voting. Moreover, when a woman becomes active in politics, she is overburdened by her domestic and political responsibilities and could not manage both the duties simultaneously there by terminating their political carrier. Thus, majority of women in the sample are found not interested to participate in active politics like contesting elections due to the above reason. The internal fragmentation or groupiesm is found very high among the Bishnupriya Manipuri people. As a result their votes are also got divided and it becomes very difficult for a woman candidate to win the election. Therefore out of the fear of losing election majority of Bishnupriya Manipuri women

rather prefer for non-participation. Lastly, the most important factor for under representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in electoral politics is the current of vote bank politics that dominate Indian political system. Bishnupriya Manipuris as an ethnic group has low level of party membership and when it comes to women it is still lower; and those who have the membership hardly have any voice within the party so as to influence the choice of candidate. It is small wonder then that the number of women contesting the election is so low. Since the Bishnupriya Manipuri community is a microscopic minority community having lower voting strength, political parties show little even no interest of giving tickets to the candidate that too women of this community. Particularly in urban areas where their population is very negligible no political party even bother about them. Thus, in the midst of cast based and vote bank politics it is very difficult for Bishnupriya Manipuri women to contest an election without political party support. Even though if they contest election then it is almost utopian to win an election particularly at the state and national level election. Thus, Bishnupriya Manipuri women are double marginalized i.e. one at the gender level and another at the community level which resulted their marginal representation in electoral politics.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it can be concluded that though the participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in voting is very high but their representation in decision making bodies is very inadequate. This indicates that high voting turnout does not necessarily lead to high level of participation in other modes of electoral politics. Women to a large number participate in voting because it is a simple and less time demanding activity. The more complex and time demanding the political activity such as contesting elections the less is the participation of women in it. The lack of interest of women coupled with the lack of opportunities, resources and other facilities e.g. absence of the reservation policy at the state and national legislatures, the proportion of women in contesting elections is nil in the higher level i.e. State Legislature and Parliament. Besides, belonging to a microscopic minority community, the Bishnupriya Manipuri women had to face several problems one at the gender level and another at the community level as they belong to a minority community. Therefore the govt. must take some affirmative action such as political reservation for this indigenous linguistic minority community otherwise they will remain backward and marginalized in politics which is adversely affecting their overall development. Besides, each member of this community should realize the negative impact of groupism or fragmentalism on the political development of the community and should work with unity for the greater interest of the community. There is also a need to change the patriarchal mentality of the community. Political participation is no doubt an important indicator affecting women's empowerment and status. Therefore, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community deserves attention of policy makers and particularly the poor status of women in the political field needs to be addressed thoroughly so that they got the opportunity to contribute to the development of their community on the one hand

and can improve their status in the socio-economic and cultural environment in which they live on the other.

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