

# Rural Women's Participation in Electoral Politics

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**Abstract** – Education plays the key role in the entry of women in politics. Mass literacy programmes are to be adopted for the eradication of illiteracy. If more and more women are educated, it will enable to bring more women in the mainstream politics. An Awareness Campaign about women's political and legal rights should be organized twice or once in a month mainly in the rural areas. Women leaders should inspire women to participate in the political, rallies, election accompanying, meetings etc and this will increase women's interest in politics. Political training should be imparted to both man and women legislators. There is an urgent need to create a political will to change the attitude of the people as 'Politics is social work'. Women should be encouraged to participate in the grass root administration and through participation they will be trained and experienced. These women must be given a chance in the decision making process. Criminalisation of politics and character assassination are the greatest hindrances to women's entry and it was felt that the increase in the number of women in the decision-making bodies would help in countering these problems. Women should take active role in the political parties. Their leadership capabilities will force the political parties to project more women as candidates for election. Women should join in the trade unions, pressure groups, and other women organizations and service to these organizations will impart leadership ability among them. To join access to high-level political decision-making, one needs to have an extra ordinary strength and will and determination. It may mean sacrificing personal pleasure and happiness women politicians have to work hard, twice as hard as their male counter parts in order to be recognized and to make their presence felt. Political parties should be liberal towards women. They must consider women as fittest candidates. Deprived by the political parties women are bound to contest election as independent candidates where there is less chance of winning. After entering in the administrative bodies, women should not limit themselves within the party politics. They must engage themselves to the various committees and prove their proficiencies. Strengthening the linkage between women politicians and women's organization is also needed. The Government and all political parties should take initiative to pass the women reservation bill in the Parliament to make 33% reservation into practice. Only then we can hope for a handful number of women into politics. Agencies for better political communication should be established from where accurate political, economic and educational information can be given.

**Keywords** – Women, Political, Constitution, Goalpara District.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In India almost half of the total population is female. So, far the success of Indian democracy is concerned both male and female should participate in the democratic institutions of the country. But in the male dominated Indian society, the participation of women in democratic institution is not to the expected level. The women of the country should be involved in the decision making process to protect their interests while decisions are made. The importance of women's political participation for a viable Democratic Polity is being increasingly realized in all corners of the world. Women constitute nearly 50 percent of the total population in any country and if it has adopted a democratic system it cannot run successfully with just half of the population. It will be a crippled democracy. Moreover, women as a group have problems, demands and aspirations, which cannot be aptly expressed by men. The problem issues of the people in any country such as education, employment, health and nutrition besides the country's foreign policy, relationships with other countries, issues of war and peace, science and technology, protection of the environment do need a women's angle because they will affect women too, in a particular manner.

A nation's march towards progress and prosperity remains a dream, its aspiration unfulfilled and unrealized unless women actively participate in all developmental activities of that country. Thus to emphasize the importance of women's participation and their role in politics is to emphasize the obvious. If proper facilities and encouragement are given, Indian women can participate efficiently in all the national activities on an equal footing with men. The empowerment of women could be brought about only if it is based on granting them basic economic rights, educational rights and political rights. Thus, it is an imperative necessity to provide opportunity to women in the decision-making processes at all levels to make empowerment of women a meaningful reality. Women as an

integral part, account for 495.74 million and represent 48.3% of the country's total population as per 2001 census. (Source: Census Report of 2001) Necessity of raising the status and education of women has already been stressed in our constitution through Fundamental Rights and Various Directive Principles of State Policy. They have been provided with the right to an adequate means of livelihood and equal pay with that of men for their work. Women workers have also been provided for health care and maternity relief.

Even in the Fundamental Duties, stress has been laid on the duty of every citizen of India to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Many laws and judicial decisions have restored the dignity of women. To protect their rights, measures have been taken to give them share in the family property. For their emancipation from cruel practices, laws have been enacted. To empower women, reservation of one-third of seats through the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts, 1991, 1992 for them has been made in the Panchayats and Municipalities. There is a similar proposal for reservation of seats for them in Parliament and in the State Legislatures.

The Constitution of India provides for equal political right to women through the universal adult franchise. Its preamble promises to secure to all its citizens' justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex and Article 16 (1) and (2) providing for equality of any public office. Moreover, certain specific provisions have been incorporated in the constitution through the seventy – third amendment Act. The 73rd amendment Act have made statutory provision with regard to the reservation of women in their Panchayati Raj institution and conducted the elections on the basis of this act. As a result, there are about one million women elected representatives in rural local bodies of the country. Thus it has opened a straight way for political participation of rural women in India. The reservation system at grassroots level has provided new horizons for women participation in political activities. It is also a step forward towards the empowerment of women in India society. It is necessary to create proper social, economic and political conditions to enable women to participate effectively in electoral politics. Their entries into the rural political system would certainly ensure a change in the political environment of the villages. India is the second largest populous country in the world. 16 percent of the world's population lives in India. According to the census report of 2001 the total population is 1.027 billion, where sex ratio is 1000: 933, Male: Female respectively. (Source: Census Report of 2001) The women population in India is 48.11 percent and 80 percent of them reside in rural areas. Most of them are engaged in domestic and household activities. Even after Six decades of independence, they have not been able to participate effectively in various occupations. The woman is considered weaker sex in caste-ridden, male-dominated and orthodox society. All these conditions of women can be changed through literacy, political awakening and change in prevailing social value. The concept of gender in political participation is abstract and it can be used successfully for women's participation in political life of the country.

Hence the political empowerment of women folk is very essential as well as to generate among them about their rights and responsibilities. The female population constitutes nearly half of the total population of the country as per Census report of 2001. For the success of Indian democracy, real participation of both men and women in the democratic institutions is highly essential. But in the male dominated Indian society, the participation of women in the democratic institutions is not to the expected level. As both male and female are the citizens of the country, so for their proper development, both of them should equally participate in the democratic institutions, which are functioning for their development. But the participation of women in decision-making process is not at par with their male counterparts.

The situation in Assam is not different than rest of the country. According to the census report of 2001, the total population of Assam is 26,655,528. Out of this 8,22,035 live in Goalpara District. (Source: Department of Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, Guwahati) So, there are a considerable number of women living in the Goalpara District of Assam. But their participation in politics is not adequate. Women should come forward in large number and take the lead in the decision making process so as to ensure the socioeconomic and political development of all women population of the district. This is because of the fact that women can know about their problems better than men and in the same way they can find out ways of solution of the problems. If the male members in various fields dominate them then they would not be able to work freely for their self-development.

Women's participation is considerably high in informal political activities like demonstrations, mobilizations and other similar activities. Their participation in such atmosphere is much encouraged and considered as important part of every political party in the country. Women's active participation in politics in India raised the issue of representation in politics first time in 1917 in the form of a demand for universal adult franchise which was achieved by 1930. With the Indian constitution coming into force in 1950, women were constitutionally granted equal right to political participation in the country. Today the 33% reservation into Panchayat level may have increased women's representation in figures but still their representation remained marginalized.

Since 1951, the Indian women have been participating in politics as voters, as party workers and as candidates contesting various elections. Voting is the most important and basic means by which women are assimilated in the political process and learn how to exercise power. But Indian women slowly began to realize the actualization of promises of equality in politics is not a smooth process. However, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments have provided for reservation of seats for women at local level in the elected bodies in rural and urban areas. According to the census of 2001, the total population of Assam is 266,38409 and 48% population comprises of women. Moreover, the majority of women reside in rural areas. The decentralized government in the form of Panchayati Raj institutions is a living proof of democracy and therefore the major portion of the grass-root level must be involved in electoral politics to justify this role and position.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives on which the present study is focused may be specified as follows-

- To know the role of women in the political arena and awareness
- To figure out the number of women representatives from Goalpara District in the Lok Sabha and the Assam Legislative Assembly
- To highlight the trend in the recruitment of women candidates by political parties for contesting elections
- To study whether women are participating in the decision making process up to the expected level though there is no legal obstacle in this matter
- To examine the causes responsible for low-level participation of women in politics
- To study the socio-economic features of the women in this locality and its impact on electoral politics.
- To explore the constraints faced by the women in performing their role in the electoral politics.

## III. AREA UNDER STUDY

Goalpara district is situated on the South bank of the river Brahmaputra. The geographical location of the Goalpara District is between latitude 25° 50' N and longitude 90° 07' to 91° 05' E at 100-500 m above the mean sea level (msl). It covers an area of 1,831 sq km and is bounded by West and East Garo Hill districts of Meghalaya on the South; Kamrup district on the East, Dhubri District on the West and the river Brahmaputra all along the North. The total population of the Goalpara district is 8, 22, 035 (2001 census) and male and female ratio is 1000:956. The literacy rate is 47.46%. Scheduled tribe (ST) population in the district is 16.10% of the total population and Scheduled Caste population is 4.80%. Total working population of the district is 2, 74,150(33.34%). The demographic pattern is given in the following table. Out of the total population of 8, 22, 035 in the district, 4, 54, 667 people live in the flood affected area. About 20.00% (36,503 ha) of the district is under forest coverage, 45.76% (83,502 ha) is net cropped area and 17.98% (32,819 ha) is barren and uncultivable area. Only 36.44% agricultural land is irrigated. Gross cropped area of the district is 76.42% (1,39,448 ha) with a cropping intensity of 167%. Out of the total cropped area of 32,538 ha, a total of 18,269 ha are flood affected. The word Goalpara was derived from 'Gwaltippika' meaning Guwali Gaon in Assamese and village of the milkmen in English. Sir Edward Gait, a British historian had concluded that Goalpara was the capital of the kingdom of Kumar Bhaskar Barma. It was evidenced from the report of the great Chinese traveler Hiuentang, who visited Assam during the period of Kumar Bhaskar Barma. Goalpara district was ruled by British since 1765. Before that Goalpara was a part of Koch Kingdom. In 1826, British accessed Assam and Goalpara and were annexed to Assam in 1874.

The researcher has selected the Goalpara district at block and panchayat level such as Matia, Mornoi, Molandubi, Dhaigaon, Kothalbari as field for the present study.

### A. *Significance Of The Study*

The present study bears wider importance and deeper significance in terms of role of women in Goalpara District, Assam. The study on empowerment of women through political participation will certainly help us to know their socio-economic status as well as the involvement in electoral process at local bodies. The empowerment of women is an utmost necessity of the present day.

There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all socioeconomic, political, education, health-care, nutrition and legal. Therefore, the study will help in having an empirical appraisal of the facts like the present day standing of the women of the study area. Regarding the significance of the study, the following important points may be mentioned.

- The present study will add new knowledge and information regarding the participation of women in politics in Goalpara District
- The information and findings of the study will greatly help the different government departments, NGOs and individuals working for the well-being and development of the women flock in the district
- The present study will enable to reveal reliable information on the status of women in politics and women empowerment.
- The study will encourage the scholars to carry on further study in this sphere in future.
- It will enable us to know whether the participation of women in politics in Goalpara District is low as compared to the males.
- It will also reveal that if the participation of women is low than exact, what are the causes acting behind it.

The various studies related to women have done merely to confirm the political impression that –

- Women are not independent voters i.e. in casting their votes women are guided by the male guardian of the family.
- A majority of women are still illiterate which restrains them to imply their own decision.
- Majority of the woman politicians have come from economically well off families and have at least one of her close relatives mostly father, mother or husband involved in politics and show linkage of their political career with their families.
- In many cases women lack information and political awareness which prevents them from active participation in politics.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The researcher has selected the topic “Rural Women’s Participation In Electoral Politics: A Case Study With Special Reference To Goalpara District, Assam ” for the present study due to the following reasons:

- The researcher is interested to know how the women participation in electoral politics has helped women empowerment and its impact on society. It also becomes an enquiring factor to learn about the various aspects of social determinants.
- It has also attracted the researcher to compare the trend of women participation in electoral politics and how it will help in social mobilization.

Since the study is on political participation pattern in Goalpara district, the universe of the study covers different development blocks and Panchayats therein. The investigator has randomly selected 200 women respondents of different categories and also different communities to represent the whole scenario of the studied area. There are as many as 81 Gaon Panchayats under different Development Blocks in Goalpara district. The Gaon Panchats under Matia Block include Sidhabari, Nabagata Simlitola, Matia, Bakaitary, Karipara, Dolguma Kodomtola, Buduchar, Sri Surjyagiri, Baladmari Char, Mornoi and Harimura. The Krishnai Block include Molandubi, Jira, Krishnai, Dhaigaon, Tukra Bormohora, Manikpur Bhelakhamar, Fofonga, Messelkhowa, and Dhir Majjakhili Gaon Panchayats. The Rangjuli Block includes Kothakuthi, Dhupdhara, Khutabari, Simlitola, Rangjuli, Kahibari, Tiplai, Dhanubhanga, and Ambari Gaon Panchayats.

The Gaon Panchayats under Kushdhowa Block include Majjakhili, Darangiri, Kushdhowa, Beguan Kathalguri, Lela, Dudhnoi, Puranibhita, and Damra.

The Gaon panchayat under Balijana Block include Balijana, Dwarka, Bordamal, Bodahapur, Baladmari, Agia, Kalpaniandamari, Kumri, Kalyanpur, Dariduri. Again the Gaon panchayat under Kharmuja Block include Khankhowa Char, Kharmuja, Markula, Basbari, Ramharirchar, Ambari, Baguan, Nalonga, Rowmari. The Gaon panchayat under Lakhipur Block are namely Pukhuripara, Joyramkuchi, Bapirbhita jurigaon, Dodan, Foringapara, Damar, Chunari, Aolatoli, Kalshabhanga, Rowkhowa, Saktola. The Jaleswar Block comprises fourteen number of Gaon panchayat which are Takimari, Haguripara, Hasdoba, Gossaidubi, Gournagar, Khalisabhita, Guriadhap, Simlabari, Katarihara, Tarangapur, Khathuri, Monkola saildhowa, Rajmita and Jaleswar.

Out of these Gaon Panchayats of Goalpara District, the investigator has selected only 5 Gaon Panchayats covering the whole district by the random sampling method.

The present study was based on the empirical investigation of the participants and voters in Goalpara. For conducting the empirical investigation, method of multistage random sampling was followed. Fifty per cent of the Gaon Panchayats, viz., Matia, Mornoi, Molandubi, Dhaigaon and Kathalbari are selected at random for intensive investigation. Consequently, 5 nos. of Gaon Panchayats and about 200 hundred participants was selected on the basis of random sampling.

The investigation was conducted with the help of a structural interview schedule constructed for the purpose. In view of the constraints of time, manpower and other reasons 200 respondents were selected through simple random sampling technique. The study is exploratory cum analytical. As the study mainly deals with the women participation in electoral politics, hence Panchayat units are selected that might bring a solution of the problem of women participation in electoral politics and their empowerment. Therefore, the main cause of this study is to study the opportunities and problems of women participation in electoral politics. For this study the various Gaon Panchayats of Goalpara District have been selected.

A set of interview schedule has been framed especially for this purpose to know the status of the women participation in electoral politics. The collection of data carried out from field investigation and different secondary sources. Data and information so collected have been tabulated and analyzed with the help of simple statistical tools and inferences drawn therein.

The primary data are collected by seeking answers to a set of preconceived questions through proposed interviews. The data are collected from at least 40 respondents of each of the Gaon Panchayats of studied area. The samples are taken from the Gaon Panchayats representing General caste, Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe, OBC/MOBC and minority community are selected for collection of data. The interview schedule was designed in such a way so that detailed information about the women participation in electoral politics may be gathered. To collect the secondary data interview guide was applied. It is taken to get the information about location, population, literacy rate, and communication systems etc. of the entire field of study.

## V. FINDINGS

The important points as emerged out from the observation as well as field data may be summarized as follows:

1. The respondents are within the age group of 18 to 65 years. 2. About 53 percent respondents have 4 to 5 family members in their household and most of them are found to be living in the nuclear family and only 19 percent have above 5 family members.

3. The surveyed women are distributed in three religious groups such as Hinduism, Islam and Christian. Maximum numbers of them are followers of Hinduism.

4. Illiteracy and woman empowerment are of great concern not only to India but also to most developing countries. It was seen that 29 percent are illiterate and only 38 percent have been taking education upto the level of higher secondary standard and only 13 percent upto postgraduate level.

5. Respondents are taken from different occupational categories such as housewife, daily wage earner, farmer, student and business. 6. Economic condition of the respondents' household are divided into three categories, i.e., below poverty line, in poverty line and above poverty line on the basis of income and size of the family.

7. The maximum number of data is collected from married women. Out of the selected respondents 46 percent are unmarried 8. Political participation means participation in the exercise of power, the power to effectively influence decision-making processes and policies, to reverse the existing situation wherever they are disadvantageous and to bring about necessary social changes.

9. It is untenable to argue that a substantial increase in the representation of women will automatically lead to greater promotion of women's interest.

10. Women's interest can be promoted only when factors like sexual division of labour, exclusion of women from certain positions and levels of power, and their poor representation at decision-making machineries are done away with.

11. Women's position in politics was first recognized by the Congress

Leadership which couldn't ignore women's valuable contribution to the nationalist movement.

12. The political parties generally consider women capable as flag bearers, but they are not considered capable of fighting elections. 13. Different political parties, both of national and regional levels, in their election manifestoes, talk about women's empowerment, right to equality for women in all spheres, reservation of seats for women in matters of political participation, welfare programmes for women and so on and so forth. But in practice, they believe in adhocism in dealing with women problems. 14. The political parties seem to seize upon the 'deceased leader's wife syndrome' to nominate women candidates regardless of their assessment of candidates in the usual run of things. 15. The political parties are to come out of the narrow grooves of treating women's problems as merely the welfare related measures.

16. The women themselves have to increase their own awareness as a distinctive constituency as women.

17. There are various factors, which are responsible for the low participation of women in politics. The causes behind low participation of women in politics include poor educational level, poor economic condition, shyness, less

support from guardians, family as well as society. 18. Failure in politics is caused due to mostly family burden followed by poor education and poor economic condition.

19. There is a gradual increase in the number of female contestants in the Assam Legislative Assembly Elections since 1991, however, till now it is not upto the mark. Reservation policy for women in the Assembly and in the parliament would provide at least a greater opportunity for women to come into mainstream of politics.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

From the facts stated above it can be concluded that though the participation of women in politics is, however, slightly increasing, it is not to the level of satisfaction. In fact, from the study it is revealed that women empowerment can be ensured through women participation at various stages of political spheres. Political participation of women along with upliftment of levels of education to be improved at par with male counterparts for societal development. Until and unless moral boon of the people are not customized, any commandment on the desired subject would not be influential.

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