

Women's Participation in the Legislative Assemblies of Northeast India: An Outlook

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to examine the gender inequality in the legislative bodies of Northeast India using different indicators based on various secondary sources of data. This paper reveals that despite having a good literacy rate women are under-representation in the mainstream political bodies in the region. However, inequality between men and women remained in the region, and different ethnic groups usually do not believe in gender discrimination. The main objective of the research is to analyze women's partaken level in the political institutions especially Legislative Assemblies of Northeast India and to find out the major issues and challenges of women's political representation. It will also highlight how political parties and governments of the region treated women in the political spheres. The methodology of the study is based on qualitative, quantitative, and analytical in nature. This researcher used Feminist Institutional Approach in the study which dealt with female partaken levels in different political institutions of Northeast India. The study concludes with different findings and policy suggestions concerning female political representation in the Northeast region.

Keywords: Women, Politics, Northeast India, Representation.

Introduction

North East India is a land of undulating hills and plains with a luxuriant green cover and a wide variety of rare and exotic flora and fauna. The region comprises eight states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Almost half of the population of the region is women and their partaken in the different socio-economic and political spheres are visible. Afterward Indian Independence out of British Rule in 1947, the region consisted of Assam and the princely states of Tripura and Manipur. Subsequently, Nagaland got statehood in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1975, and Mizoram in 1987, beyond the expensive territory of Assam. Tripura and Manipur remained in Union Territories from 1956 until 1972 when they acquired fully-fledged statehood. The state of Sikkim was integrated as the eighth North-Eastern state in 2002. This study explores women's representation levels in the legislative assemblies of Northeast India.

Active participation of women in electoral politics is a valid indicator of the efficacious growth of democracy in any country of the world today (Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994). Indian Constitution provides justice, equality, and liberty to all of its citizens including men and women

without any discrimination. Despite having a clear-cut constitutional mandate Northeastern women's participation in mainstream and grassroots political domain is very low. North Eastern women have largely failed to assemble the ticklish mass requisite to introduce gender perspectives in the political decision-making process at supreme levels and promote gender-friendly legislation (Muni, 1974). Women's representation in most of the Northeastern state's legislatures are very poor, it seems they are underrepresented in the legislative bodies and gender inclusion in the electoral politics.

Women's coolness representation not only existed in the North-Eastern States legislative bodies but in the government's executive decision-making bodies also. Different political parties of North East India have women's wings, but they have failed to promote women's representation at mainstream and grassroots levels in respective states. The male-dominated nature of national and regional political parties continuously discriminates women in the context of seat allotment and using them only as a vote bank without addressing their demands and aspirations. Women still remained marginalized in the context of politics; almost all major decisions are taken by male leaders of political parties. In the context of the Northeast, women's partaken as a voter in the mainstream and grassroots political sphere is increasing day by day but their representation in very poor. Women's movements are not so active in the Northeastern states and women civil society organizations are not able to mobilize women in the political domains. Different data shows that almost all of the women even in remote areas are more interested to hear political news but they have less interest to enter politics. North Eastern women's partaken in the socio-economic sphere is continuously increasing day to day in comparison to earlier.

Bestowing certain divergent outlooks about women's partaken in the electoral process grounded on primary as well as secondary sources, this article explores the underlying scratch factors which determine women's partaken level in electoral competitions. This qualitative study is an attempt to know women's political participation in the Northeastern states, how women has been treated by the government and political parties of the region, and also what are the issues and challenges of women's political participation in the region. This study provides multiple interactions on women's engagement in the political affairs in Northeast India from the historical point of view. This article concludes with different policy suggestions that focus on further enhancement of women's participation in electoral politics and governances.

North Eastern Women's Engagement in Electoral Process

Women have a respectable position in the societies of Northeastern India since the history persists. They have been involved in almost all types of activities such as economic, day to day household responsibilities, voting for good governance etc. During the course of Indian freedom struggle, Northeastern women participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Quit India Movement, and also Civil Disobedient Movement. In 1924, Assam Legislative Assembly passes a resolution related to women's political participation for the first time and as a result, Mavis Dunn was the first women elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937 from the

Shillong and she had been included in the Cabinet of Assam government (Tynsong, 2019). In the first general election of 1952, only one woman was elected from the region out of 15 seats. No woman has been elected as a Member of Parliament from Mizoram. Nagaland has never elected any female MLA since its 55 years of statehood. In 1977, only one woman has been elected from Nagaland to Lok Sabha under the banner of the United Democratic Party. Meghalaya has a matrimonial societal system, even though their female representation in the political sphere is very poor. Meghalaya’s traditional socio-political institutions such as Village Council do not allow women to become village head.

The entire trajectory of women’s representation in the Legislative Assemblies of Northeastern region is unsatisfactory. Here the analysis would be on women’s representation rate in the Legislative Assemblies of Northeast India.

Table 1: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh from 1978 to 2019

Serial Number	Election Year	Male Member	Female Member	Percentage of Female
1	1978	30	0	0
2	1980	29	1	3.4
3	1984	28	2	7.14
4	1990	59	1	1.6
5	1995	59	1	1.6
6	1999	59	1	1.6
7	2004	60	0	0
8	2009	58	2	3.4
9	2014	58	2	3.4
10	2019	57	3	5.2

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

The table explores women’s representation rate in Arunachal Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from its beginning. It makes us clear that female representation in the state’s mainstream political body has been very low. In 1978 there was no women representative in the Assembly and now in the 2019 assembly election, their representation has been increased to 5.2 percent.

Table 2: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Assam from 1952 to 2019

Serial Number	Election Year	Male Member	Number female Contested	Female Member	Percentage of Female
1	1952	107	-	1	0.9
2	1957	103	6	5	4.8
3	1962	101	4	4	3.9
4	1967	120	6	5	4.1

5	1972	106	12	8	7.5
6	1978	125	22	1	0.8
7	1983	107	3	2	1.8
8	1985	122	29	4	3.2
9	1991	121	50	5	4.1
10	1996	114	17	8	7
11	2001	116	55	10	8.6
12	2006	113	70	13	11.5
13	2011	112	85	14	12.5
14	2016	118	-	8	6.7

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

Table 2 analyzed women’s partaken level in the Assembly of Assam since independence time and also included the numbers of women contested in the elections. In the Assam Legislative Assembly election of 1952, only one woman was elected. Their representation has been increased gradually and in the 2016 election, the eight women were elected to the Assembly.

Table 3: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Manipur from 1978 to 2017

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female	Percentage of Female
1	1967	30	-	0	0
2	1972	60	3	0	0
3	1974	60	3	0	0
4	1980	60	8	0	0
5	1984	60	5	0	0
6	1990	53	7	1	1.8
7	1995	60	11	0	0
8	2000	59	11	1	1.6
9	2002	59	7	1	1.6
10	2007	60	12	0	0
11	2012	57	15	3	5.2
12	2017	58	-	2	3.4

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

Table 3 defines female representation to the state Legislative Assembly of Manipur since its statehood. It is seen that the female representation rate is very poor in the state. In the first Assembly election, there were no women elected candidate into the Assembly. In the recent 2017 Assembly election, only two women were elected to the Assembly, and their representation has increased to 3.4 percent.

Table 4: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya from 1972 to 2018

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female	Percentage of Female
1	1972	60	6	0	0
2	1978	59	1	1	1.6
3	1983	60	6	0	0
4	1988	58	3	2	3.4
5	1993	59	5	1	1.6
6	1998	57	8	3	5.2
7	2003	58	10	2	3.4
8	2008	59	12	1	1.6
9	2013	56	14	4	7.1
10	2018	56	33	3	5.3

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

This table elaborates on women's partaken in the mainstream politics of Meghalaya since its statehood and also the numbers of women who contested the elections. It mentions that in the 1972 election, there were no women MLA in the Assembly. Gradually their partaken has been increasing and now in the 2018 assembly election, only three women got elected. Still, they are underrepresented in the political domain.

Table 5: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram from 1972 to 2018

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female	Percentage of Female
1	1972	30	4	0	0
2	1978	29	1	1	3.4
3	1979	29	3	1	3.4
4	1984	29	1	1	3.4
5	1987	39	3	1	2.5
6	1989	40	-	0	0
7	1993	40	-	0	0
8	1998	40	-	0	0
9	2003	40	-	0	0
10	2008	40	10	0	0
11	2013	40	6	0	0
12	2018	40	15	0	0

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

Table 5 deals with women's political participation in the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram from its statehood to the present. It is seen that in the first Assembly election of 1972, no women were elected to the Assembly. Their representation is very unsatisfactory.

Table 6: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland from 1964 to 2018

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female	Percentage of Female
1	1964	40	0	0	0
2	1969	40	2	0	0
3	1974	60	0	0	0
4	1977	60	0	0	0
5	1982	60	1	0	0
6	1987	60	3	0	0
7	1989	60	0	0	0
8	1993	60	1	0	0
9	2003	60	3	0	0
10	2008	60	4	0	0
11	2013	60	-	0	0
12	2018	60	-	0	0

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

Table 6 mentions women's partaken level in the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland. Nagaland is the only state of North East India where no women got elected to its Legislative Assembly since its statehood of 56 years.

Table 7: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim from 1979 to 2019

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female	Percentage of Female
1	1979	32	-	0	0
2	1985	32	-	0	0
3	1989	31	-	1	3.2
4	1994	31	-	1	3.2
5	1999	31	-	1	3.2
6	2004	29	-	3	10.3
7	2009	28	-	4	14.2
8	2014	29	-	3	10.3
9	2019	29	-	3	10.3

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

Table 7 talks about Women’s representation in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim and also the number of candidates who contested the elections. In the 1979 election, no women were elected to the Assembly, but in the 2019 Assembly election, their representation has been increased to 10.3 percent, where only three women MLAs are in the Assembly.

Table 8: Number of Male and Female in the Legislative Assembly of Tripura from 1967 to 2018

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female	Percentage of Female
1	1967	30	1	0	0
2	1972	60	4	0	0
3	1977	59	6	1	1.6
4	1983	56	11	4	7.1
5	1988	58	7	2	3.4
6	1993	59	15	1	1.6
7	1998	58	21	2	3.4
8	2003	58	18	2	3.4
9	2008	57	31	3	5.2
10	2013	55	15	5	9
11	2018	57	24	3	5.2

Source: *Election Commission of India Report*

Table 8 elaborates on women’s representation in the Legislative assembly of Tripura since 1967. In the 1967 assembly election, no women candidate was elected to the state’s mainstream political institution. Gradually their representation in the political domain has been increasing and in the 2018 Assembly election, three women were elected to the house.

Barriers to Women’s Partaken in electoral Politics

Despite having clear-cut “constitutional mandates and equal rights for both men and women in all the socio-political spheres”, the existing socio-cultural norms, and male dominations in political institutions invent roadblocks women exercising in the electoral process. Professor Malhotra argued that one of the important barriers is “the paternalistic baggage of ethnicity, and hence the ethnic divisions within the northeastern states have been an impediment in this direction”. Money, power, and political connections are the most important aspect of the sphere of the electoral process. Northeastern women are less integrated with political and economic networks, and it is difficult for them to maintain these aspects.

National and regional political parties of Northeast India have their women’s wings, which they use for their electoral benefits. But they are not politically mobilizing women for entering into the electoral process. Even political parties of the region did not provide major positions to women within the party. Politics is generally regarded as the male realm, and women

remained in the household activities. It is also an important barrier. The absence of Affirmative action in mainstream political institutions of northeast India is also a reason for women's lack of representation. The government policy towards women's political empowerment is very unsatisfactory. If we look at Northeastern state's government's policies and programs towards women empowerment, it is found that there are only socio-economic policies of women empowerment. There is nothing policies for the political empowerment of women.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In the end, it can be concluded that in many states of Northeastern India, women's literacy rate is more than 80 per cent, but having a good literacy rate their representation in the state's mainstream political institutions, such as legislative bodies is very poor. North Eastern women are exercising their electoral rights, but their representation in the legislative bodies and decision-making bodies is very low. An important finding of the study is that Political parties of North East India (National or Regional) are using women only as a vote bank without addressing their proper demands and aspirations. Governments of Northeast India have only socio-economic policies toward women empowerment; they are not mobilizing women politically. Women civil society organizations in the region failed to produce good results in women's political empowerment. For the betterment of "women's political representation", the governments of the region should take different steps such as they can make a reservation of seats for women in the Legislative Assemblies. Political parties should organize different orientation programs and mobilize women from the socio-political point of view and they should engage more women in their party's decision-making process. At the grassroots level, the women's movements in the northeast and associated synergies and outlets of solidarity have to be explored.

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