

TRACING THE TREND AND PACE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE NADUAR AREA OF SONITPUR DISTRICT ASSAM

(A CASE STUDY AMONG THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF 2007 AND 2018)

JAYANTA BARUAH¹

¹Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, T.H.B. College, Jamugurihat, Sonitpur, Assam, INDIA

ABSTRACT

Women Empowerment is an emerging movement in the late of 20th century. It is recognized as a key element to achieve progress by women in all areas. The women community in the world is still lagging behind in respect of all areas- socio, economic, political. In India also the development of women community is very slow although the country has completed 70 years of its Independence. But it can be said that a country like India which is regarded as the largest democracy in the world cannot be successful in its nation building process neglecting half of the population, the women community. In our paper we will try to make a comparative study among the members who elected as members of Naduar Anchalik Panchayat, President of various Gaon Panchayats under Naduar Dev. Block and also as ward members of various Gaon Panchayats under Naduar dev. Block, Jamugurihat of Sonitpur district, Assam, in the year 2007 and 2018, to examine the progress achieved by women involving in grass root level politics. A total 40 women representative will be considered as sample of our study, 20 from among the elected representatives of 2007 and 20 from among the elected representatives of 2018. A questionnaire will be prepared for data collection.

KEYWORDS: Empowerment, Democracy, Participation.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is the most frequently used term in development dialogue in contemporary times. 'Empowerment' has been understood broadly as enhancing capabilities so as to enable women to take greater control over their lives and to transform dependencies leading to their subordination by ensuring their greater autonomy. The means for empowerment were greater information or knowledge and greater access to resources. Empowerment of women means not only political representations in the policy and decision making body but also economic self-sufficiency and independence and liberation from social and economic insecurity.

Though the present century has witnessed many outstanding achievements –stunning technological breakthrough, phenomenal economic Prosperity, remarkable advances in human survival, and for many countries political independence and freedom, but the fruits of progress have not however been equitably shared. Developing countries present an especially urgent problem as gender inequality. It is strongly correlated with poverty. Discrimination against women continues in every field such as literacy, health and nutrition. The women community has always left that they

are being deprived in the Male- dominated Society. This continuous feeling of women has led to the development of a new concept "Women Empowerment".

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The origin of the concept of Women Empowerment can be traced back to the later half of the 1970s when it was increasingly discussed and promoted by third world Feminists and women's organizations. (Sen and Grown, 1987 and Antrobus 1989). Sen and Grown, in their analysis of three decades of development policies aimed at Women, state that the concept was initially developed when many feminist scholars and activists, including those involved with Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) engaged in the project of constructing a coherent framework through which to understand "Development, Social and Economic crisis, the Subordination of women and Feminism." Thus, the original call for women's Empowerment is located within a theoretical framework that emphasizes the subordination of Women as well as the roles colonialism and development policy in shaping the position of developing countries and women and men in the International world order. In

addition, it recognizes the importance of women's agency and self transformation (Antrobus-1989).

Again, many scholars have defined the concept 'empowerment' differently. Antrobus (1989) state that empowerment is a process that enables a powerless women to develop autonomy, self-control and, with a group of women and men, a sense of collective influence over oppressive social condition. She argues that began to understand gender and oppression and organize to change ways in which different institutions sanction and facilitate their treatment as second-class citizens, the collective empowerment of women will occur. Antrobus also notes that empowerment can occur at the individual level. By enabling construction of a more equal and just society, the process of women's empowerment result in a 'redistributive of power within, as well as between, societies' and groups. This is accomplished, in part through activities, "ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge basic power relations."

Mrs. Vibha Parthasarathy, the Chairman, National Commission for women, in her inaugural Speech of the women's Political Empowerment day celebrations on April 24 & 25th, 2000 at Delhi, defined empowerment as empowerment, after all is not a position or a status. Empowerment is that which gives a person opportunity to work and we all are in search of this opportunity and it may be Political, Economic or Social.

Hot debates & discussions are still continuing in favour of women empowerment but most of the states of the world had given women their due rights practically. India, the largest democracy in the world has paved the way to give the women the chance to take active participation in decision making of local government by passing the 73rd Constitutional amendment with the Provision of reservation. More than 50 percent of the state Assemblies ratified this amendment within 6 months and on April 22, 1993; the President of India gave his assent, making it part IX of the constitution.

It is important to note that election to panchayats have not been conducted by some states of India for more than 20-25 years. But this amendment has made it mandatory to held elections to panchayats after every five years. It also reserves 33 percent seats for women in PRIs. It is important to note that at present most of the states of India have reserved 50 percent seats in PRIs for women. This is a very big step towards gender equality. The constitution of India recognizes political rights to women without any

discrimination of qualifications to participate in the decision making institutions at all levels. For a country where the levels of participations of women is very low, being one of the lowest in the world with only 9.3 percent of parliamentary seats occupied by women against 36.6 percent in Norway, 34.9 in Iceland (UNDP: HDR, 2003); this is undoubtedly a significant step towards empowering women and giving them an opportunity to be equal partners in Nation building.

This paper makes an attempt to assess the role of women representative in the context of Naduar Anchalik Panchayat area, Jamugurihat, Sonitpur district of Assam. There will be a comparative study among the elected representatives of Panchayats of 2007 and 2018 to assess the development and involvement of the women representatives in active politics i.e. women empowerment.

HYPOTHESIS

The main hypothesis of our study is to compare and found whether the women representatives of PRIs become active in politics or not during a long period of time. The role and contribution of political party and society will also be examined in our research.

METHODOLOGY

The Present study is mainly be empirical in nature and based on primary data. Besides, collection and analysis of primary data, secondary data and pertinent literature will be compiled, analyzed and review accordingly. A questionnaire was prepared and used for the collection of data for the study. Interview and interaction method has also been adopted. Data has been collected from Naduar Anchalik Panchyat and Gaon Panchyats and from other sources.

SAMPLING

The Naduar Anchalik and Development Block consist of more than 200 villages with a total population of not less than 150,000. A total 110 seats are there in Naduar Anchalik Panchayat and Development Block Area of which 10 seats are for Anchalik Panchayat and another 100 for 10 Gaon Panchayats. A total 4 seats are reserved for women in the Naduar Anchalik Panchayat of which one seat is reserved for SC candidate. In the Gaon Panchayats seats have been reserved for women according to the constitutional provisions.

It is to be noted that in the year 2007, the post of Vice President of the Naduar Anchalik Panchayat is reserved for the women representative and 40 seats are reserved for

women out of 100 seats of 10 Gaon Panchayats. Out of these 40 seats, 4 seats are reserved for SC candidates and 2 seats for ST candidates. In 2007, there were 48 women representatives in Naduar Anchalik Panchayats out of these women representatives, 3 representatives are discharging their duty as Presidents of the three Gaon Panchayats.

An analysis of the socio-economic background of a community is regarded as indispensable pre-requisite for understanding the thought and behavior of it members. Therefore, to assess the role and performance of the women representatives, it has been considered essential to know their socio-economic background. As such a few aspects of the socio-economic background of the women representatives have been mentioned before discussing the role and performances of the representatives of the grass-root level. It is to be noted that among the 20 respondents of 2007 and 20 respondents of 2018, majority are Hindu, two are Christians, Muslim and Buddhist occupied one seat each.

Again, caste-wise break-up of the respondent shows the majority of women representatives is from the General Caste.

Table 1
Speaks the fact.

Caste	Respondents/ 2007	%	Respondents/ 2018	%
General	12	60.0	14	70.0
S.C	03	15.0	03	15.0
S.T	01	5.0	01	5.0
O.B.C	04	20.0	02	10.0
M.O.B.C	Nil	-	Nil	-
Total	20	100	20	100

Respect and faith still continues on the people of middle age group though a tendency grows in the minds of the Indian voters that the young energetic youth can do better than the old one. But by selecting the representatives of middle age group in large numbers the voters of the Naduar Block Area have proved the fact that the thinking of the people that the new young generation could do better than the middle-aged group is baseless. It is interesting to note that in our comparative study of the representatives' of 2007 and 2018; the age group of 35-50 gets the preference. It is worth mentioning that though the age group of 35-50 gets more preference but in the recent election it has been shown that people gradually keep faith on the youngsters as 10.0 percent candidate gets elected in 2018 in comparing 5.0 percent in the election of 2007. It is a clear indication that

gradually old people will be out of the tussle in future as no one from the age group of 55-60 has been elected.

Table 2
Age Composition of the Respondents

Age Group	No.of Respondents /2007	%	No of Respondents /2018	%
18-25	01	5.0	02	10.0
25-30	02	10.0	04	20.0
30-35	09	45.0	07	35.0
35-40	03	15.0	03	15.0
40-45	01	5.0	02	10.0
45-50	02	10.0	01	5.0
50-55	01	5.0	01	5.0
55-60	01	5.0	--	--
Total	20	100	20	100

There are some reasons also for selecting majority of candidates from the 35-50 age groups. Firstly, most of the candidates are from the same age group; hence, the voters are compelled to vote for them even if they had preference for younger candidates. Secondly, it may be the cause for the voters for selecting the candidates from the middle aged group that members of this age group had gradually come out of their domestic duties. Hence, they can dedicate themselves for the welfare of the people.

Education continues to play an important role in managerial affairs. It is felt that without education no one can manage the administrative affairs perfectly. But the data collected for the paper has shown that the voters had not given importance on the education of the representatives while electing their representatives in the election of 2007. But there is a tremendous change in the attitude of the voters in this concern which is reflected in the recent election. This is a great sign for a nation like ours where people have been given the chance to make their own destiny. Table- 3 will tell the fact.

Table 3
Educational Qualifications of the Respondents

Edu qualification	No. of Resp/ 2007	%	No.of Resp/ 2018	%
Under-Matric	14	70.0	02	10.0
H.S.L.C	03	15.0	07	35.0
H.S.S.L.C	01	5.0	04	20.0
B.A	Nil	--	05	25.0
M.A	Nil	--	02	10.0
NIL	02	10.0	--	--
Total	20	100	20	100

It is found that a majority of representatives are mostly under-metric who represented in the election in 2007. It is very interesting to note that no graduate level candidate is elected to the office, on the contrary a candidate, having no educational qualification has been elected. It is not a good sign for democracy if candidate without higher educational qualifications are elected. It may also be mentioned here that out of the total respondents a majority of candidates are elected from party platform, therefore, Candidates nominated without good educational qualifications would lead the public affairs to party affairs. Again, it may also be mentioned here that 33 percent reservation is made possible for the women to be elected as representative with such a lower educational qualifications. The filled questionnaire shows that a majority of the respondents were elected only from the reserved seats. But there is a total change in the election scenario of 2018. While selecting candidates political parties also gave importance on their education. Hence in 2007 there were 70.0 percent candidates with under matric qualifications while this time only 10.0 candidates get ticket with this qualification. It is worth mentioning that no illiterate women contested in the election while 25.0 percent B.A. and 10.0 M.A. pass candidate contested in the election. Good educational qualification will help the members to understand the policies which are formulated for the benefit of the rural people and also procedures through which they can function properly.

To test their depth of knowledge about the schemes of the PRIs a question was forwarded to them as “Do you know about the schemes of PRIs”? It is a welcoming sing that most of the respondents answered positively. But there is a big gap in this concern while we make a comparative study among the respondents of 2007 and in 2018. The table-4 will speak the truth.

Table 4
Knowledge regarding Schemes of PRIs

Knowledge of Schemes	No. of Resp/ 2007	%	No.of Resp/ 2018	%
Yes	06	30.0	20	100
No	14	70.0	--	Nil
Total	20	100	20	100

Date of the above table clearly reflects that the representatives selected by the people in 2018 are well acquainted with the present day context. They really come out to serve the people of their locality. While asked about various schemes every one answered what they knew. They told about PMGSY, IAY, Atal Amrit Yojana, Annapurna Scheme, Old age pension etc. So it is a good sign that our representatives are

aware about the schemes which they would implement for the benefit of their people. Considering the above discussion we can say that women representatives are active in politics at present.

Another important question was forwarded to the respondents to examine their level of interest and activeness in politics. While asked “who distributes the work load in your panchayat”? There was confusion among the representatives but majority of the respondent answered boldly that they themselves distributes the work load of their panchyat. It is note worthy that the representatives of 2007 were failed to give a bold answer to this question. The table given below will show the fact.

Table 5
Distribution of work load by the respondents

By whom work load distributed	No. of Resp/ 2007	%	No. of resp/ 2018	%
Panchayat	02	10.0	01	5.0
President	03	15.0	03	15.0
Own selves	01	5.0	09	45.0
Secretary	06	30.0	02	10.0
Engineer	03	15.0	03	15.0
No response	05	25.0	02	10.0
Total	20	100	20	100

To know about their leadership quality an additional question was put to them i.e. who does take the decisions on their family matters. Replying to this, a majority of 2007 (12) replied that they and their husbands collectively take the decisions. Only a small portion of the respondents (02) said that they take the decisions by themselves. Four respondents replied that their husbands take the decisions; while another (04) respondents have replied that their father-in-law take the decision on their family matters. While answering to the same question a majority 75.0 percent (15) elected representatives of 2018 answered that they themselves take the decision of their family matters. 10.0 percent (02) respondents replied that their husband takes the decision of their family matters. Another 15.0 percent (03) respondents did not reply to this question. The above discussion reflects that the women folk of our society gradually become very active in matters of decision making.

To test their interest in various issues of the present day situation and to test their level of awareness a good nos of questions such as ‘Do you know about Gender-Equality’? Do you know about 73rd Amendment of Indian Constitution?, Do you know the name of MLA of your

constituency? were forwarded to them. It is to be noted that these questions were also asked the representatives of the year 2007. While analyzing data it has come to light that the members of panchayats of 2018 are very much aware about the questions we forwarded to them seeking their respond. Almost all the representatives are positive while giving answers. Majority 75.0 percent representatives are aware about gender inequality. According to them gender inequality should be abolished. Regarding 33.0 percent reservation of seats they are in the view that as they have been given the chance to serve people in PRIs they should also been given the chance to serve people of India by passing the Women Reservation Bill in the Parliament.

Representatives of the 2007 were also in the view that gender inequality should be abolished. Among the respondents 30.0 percent knew about it. On the other hand, majority of the respondents 50.0 percent (10) knew clearly about the 33.0 reservation for women bill issue. But a little 20.0 percent respondent (04) were in darkness about this hot issue. Majority of the representatives of 2007 and 2018 have come to know about gender-equality issue, the Women Reservation Bill from Newspapers; some knew it from their husbands and another few knew it from the public meetings. A question was forwarded to the representatives to know how they engaged themselves before entering into politics. Data shows that our respondents were engaged themselves in different fields before entering into politics. Table-6 will show the fact.

Table 6
Respondents associated with various activities before entering into politics.

Activities they engaged	No of resp/ 2007	%	No of resp/ 2018	%
Social Work	07	35.0	09	45.0
Household Work	12	60.0	06	30.0
Service	Nil	--	03	15.0
Business	01	5.0	02	10.0
Total	20	100	20	100

Data of the above table clears that most the respondents of our study engaged in different activities of the society before entering in to politics.

The respondents were also asked about the role played by the political parties in the time of election. Almost all the respondent appreciated the role played by the political party in the time of election. They said that it is the political party that took the leading part of their victory. Leaders of

political parties give them knowledge about various subjects relating to election of panchayats, trained them how to deliver lecture in the public meetings and how to woo voters etc. So, it can be said that political parties plays a major role in empowering women of our society. While asked about their future political aspirations, good nos of respondents 45.0 percent (09) answered positively and they said they will try to involve in politics in future. Though they are new comers in politics but they learnt a lot in joining politics. It is to be mentioned here that 10.0 percent respondents of 2007 also elected in the panchayat election of 2012.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The comparative study that we undertake to assess the involvement of women in politics actively as elected representatives of panchyats during the period’s of 2007 and 2018 i.e., empowerment of women is successful in drawing a fruitful result. The study has shown that the women community becomes very active in their duty as representatives at present. They know why people have voted them to power. Results shows that only 30.0 percent representatives of 2007 election were aware about the various schemes related to PRIs. But it is pertinent to mention here that 100 percent representatives are aware about various schemes of PRIs who have been elected as representatives in 2018. It is noteworthy that member of civil society also become conscious in the selection of their representatives. It was seen that in the panchyat election of 2007 majority of respondents were under matric. There were no respondents having qualifications with B.A. and M.A. in 2007. A majority 70.0 percent of respondents were under matric. It is also a matter of great concern that people elected a member having without qualification. But there is a tremendous change this time and people elected their representatives with good qualifications. People know that representatives without good qualifications will not be able to function properly in a very critical situation of PRIs. The findings of our study have reflected that in 2018 most of the representatives are with good qualifications. Among the representatives 25.0 percent are B.A. pass, 10.0 percent are M.A. pass candidates. So, from the above analysis it can be assume that the representatives elected in 2018 will be more successful in their work as compared to their counterpart of 2007.

It is observed that political parties play an important role in women empowerment. Political parties try to win election by selecting good candidates, impart knowledge to candidates to woo voters. Provide knowledge to deliver lecture in public meetings and rallies etc. almost

all the candidates of 2007 and 2018 openly admitted that political parties have given 100 percent effort to make their candidates win. So it clear that political parties help in women empowerment.

But it should also be noted that though the consciousness among the women community has increased in all concerns but they are still depriving in society. Reports show that in India which is regarded as the largest democracy in the world provides women only 11.2 percent of parliamentary seats as against occupied by 36.6 percent in Norway, 34.9 in Iceland (UNDP: HDR, 2003). In Assam also women have been given a minimal 11.90 percent representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly since independence. Hence significant steps should be taken for empowering women and giving them an opportunity to be equal partners in Nation building. On the other hand, though in most of the states in India 50.0 seats in PRIs have been reserved for the women but still the Women Reservation Bill is pending in the parliament since long. Political parties are playing indifferent role in this regard. Hence political parties must work for the development of women in its real sense.

Women in India, who constitute half of the population, still lagging behind in all concerns as compared to their male counterparts. But a country with democratic setup cannot achieve its desired goals depriving its half population, the women folk.. So women should also be given equal share in all respects socio, economic and political. Women are lagging behind in matters of education. It is pertinent to mention that in the time of India's independence in 1947 the percentage of education of women was a very negligible 6.0 percent. At that time only 10.0 percent women were enrolled in educational institutions. The literacy rate of women was 8.9 percent in the post-independence period. The percent of enrollment of women in educational institutions has increased up to 41.5 percent in 2010-11 which is not at all satisfactory.

Finally we can conclude our discussion by saying that as women constitute 48 percent of the total population of India hence every government whether Central or States must work with dedication to materialize the principle of gender equity which is enshrined in Indian Constitution, in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles to reduce the gender gap to achieve the fruit of women empowerment.

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