

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ASSAM: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION

Ashim Hazarika

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

L.G.B. Girls' College, Tezpur, Assam

E-mail: ashim.lgbgc@gmail.com

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Abstract

Assam is a diverse and culturally rich state located in the eastern part of India. Assam is famous for the one-horned rhino found in Kaziranga, Digboi, the first oil refinery in Asia, and for its tea gardens. In the smooth functioning of democracy, mass political participation from each and every section of society, including women, is very essential. In Assam, women actively participated in India's independence movement and in various agitations after independence. However, their active political participation was not impressive after independence. Despite constituting approximately half of the state's population, women in Assam remain significantly under-represented in formal power structures. From the first general election of 1952 to date, women's participation in electoral politics reveals that, in spite of the female voting percentage increasing, women candidates rarely exceed 11% of the total contestants in the Assam Legislative Assembly. In this article, I tried to discuss the complex landscape of women's political participation in Assam, and also in Assam's politics, it not only requires legislative quotas like the Women's Reservation Bill but also a fundamental shift in party cultures and socio-economic support systems to bridge the gap between women as "party workers" and "voters" and women as "political leaders".

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Assam Legislative Assembly, Gender Representation Gap, Electoral Politics in India, Patriarchal Barriers, Women's Reservation Policy, Political Empowerment of Women, Voter-Representative Paradox.

Introduction

In any democratic country, especially the world largest democratic country India the mass participation of women is not merely a matter of social justice but a fundamental requirement for inclusive governance and this applicable to all the modern democratic country of the world. In Assam it was seen that a sharp dichotomy between high female electoral engagement and persistently low legislative representation. From 1952, first general election data to till 2024 shows that as a voter the percentage of female voter increasing but as a representative it was not as expectation, women legislative representation has never exceeded 11.1% in the 126-member Assam Assembly. patriarchal party structures, financial constraints, and the "winnability" myth are the main

barrier in front of women representation. The 73rd constitutional amendments empowered women with 50% seats reserved for women in Panchayat and women are actively participated and the successes of the grassroots politics reflects that if women get a chance, they can show their talent as a politician but there was no such provision in case of Assembly.

Historical Background: The Assamese Political Paradox

Assam women have historically escaped some of the more severe social ills found elsewhere in other parts of India, like Sati (female foeticide), likely due to unique egalitarian indigenous cultures but social relative-freedom has not translated it into political power in the last 75 years of India's independence. To address socio-cultural and educational issues and provide a platform to women in 1915 "Mahila Samiti" was formed which eventually morphed into political activism. Political awareness amongst women began with Mahatma Gandhi's 1921 visit to Assam, which inspired many women like Chandra Prabha Saikiani, Amalprabha Das and Pushpalata Das to break the domestic and social boundaries. In 1924 Assam legislative Assembly pass a resolution granting women the right to vote. During the Quit India Movement in 1942, Assamese women surpassed many others in courage, Kanaklata Barua and Bhogeswari Phukanani sacrifice their lives for freedom. From 1960 to 1985 many Assamese women actively participate in different movement like Language movement or Assam movement and women are backbone of this student's led movements. these movement birthed political parties but the leadership remained almost exclusively in the hand of male. when Assam movements transitioned into political parties (like the AGP), women were largely in to the supportive roles rather than leadership positions.

The Statistical Reality

Since first general election 1952, the number of women contesting has grown slowly but remains a fraction of the total. Despite women active presence on the streets, women's representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly has remained less. In 1952, only 6 women contested out of 458 candidates; by 2016, this rose to 91 out of 1064 and in 2026 election 59 out of 722 but the success rate did not follow suit. In the 2021 Assembly elections, only 6 women were elected from 76 who contested but historical peak occurred in 2011, when 14 women (11.1%) were elected to the 126-member house.

Women's participation in the Assam Assembly from 1952 through to the 2026 elections.

Year	Total Seats	Women Contested	Women Winners	Success Rate
1952	108	6	2	33.3%
1957	108	10	5	50.0%
1962	105	4	4	100.0%
1967	126	9	5	55.6%
1972	114	12	8	66.7%
1978	126	20	1	5.0%
1983	126	3	2	66.7%
1985	126	29	5	17.2%
1991	126	50	5	10.0%
1996	126	45	6	13.3%
2001	126	55	10	18.2%
2006	126	70	13	18.6%
2011	126	85	14	16.5%
2016	126	91	8	8.8%
2021	126	76	6	7.9%
2026	126	59	TBD	

If we analysis the above table data then we point out some important aspects in women representation. In 1952 elections Usha Barthakur become the First Female MLA of Assam. In 1962 100% success rate for women contestants' success rate. Padmavati Kumari Gohain served as Minister in 1967 & 1970. Renuka Devi Barkataki a member of Assembly later becomes the Union Minister of State for Education, Social Welfare and Culture in 1977. Lowest percentage of women success rate was only 0.79 % despite 22 contestants in 1978 election. Syeda Anowara Taimur becomes first and only women Chief-Minister of Assam in 1980. Hemoprova Saikia the wife of late ex Chief Minister of Assam Hiteswar Saikia also served as Minister in Assam Government in 2001. Pramila Rani Brahma she also served as Cabinet Minister in 2006 & 2016 government and she broke barriers for tribal women in the Bodo heartland, serving as Agriculture and Forest Minister of Assam. Year 2011 was remarkable for women representation because 14 women win and the success rate was 11.11% which was highest till today (before 2026 election result). Sumitra Doley Patir and Bismita Gogoi also served as Minister in 2015. Although the number of contestants peaked at 91 in 2016, the actual number of winners fell sharply to 8 in that same year, highlighting a gap between participation and electoral success. Nandita Garlosa was served as Minister in 2022 government. In 2021 Ajanta Neog become the first female finance minister as well as she is the longest serving female legislator of Assam since 2001, she representing a rare breach of the "economic cabinet" traditionally reserved for men. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, female voter turnout rose to 47.1%, compared to 43.1% in 2019. This indicates high political awareness. This

is despite a record female voter turnout in recent years, for the April 2026 elections, the number of women candidates has dropped significantly to 59, a 22.3% decline from 2021.

Barriers to Participation

There is a massive "participation gap" in Assam. Women are highly active as voters but however, this electoral power does not translate into holding office.

- **Patriarchal Society:** one of the common barriers for women active political participation in Assam was deeply rooted norms often confine women to the "private domain" (household), while men dominate the "public sphere".

- **Socio-Cultural Stigma:** It was observed that Women in direct politics often face character assassination, harassment, false allegation and societal pressure to prioritize domestic duties.

- **The "Winnability" Myth:** All the Parties including National and State politics frequently claim that women are "less winnable" and thus field them in difficult constituencies or deny them tickets altogether, in 2026 Assembly election only 59 women are given party tickets or contesting independently.

- **Financial Barriers:** In politics and in Political campaigning in India is very much expensive which was often not possible for women of Assam to bear. Women of Assam often lack independent access to property or capital, making them dependent on male relatives for funding in the election.

- **Muscle Power:** Now-a-days in politics muscle power plays a very important role in Election and Politics. Increasing violence and character assassination in politics act as a deterrent for that women are not interested in politics.

- **Mentorship & Guidance:** Women are not getting proper guidance and advice as like man in politics. Unlike men, women are not well connection and link where party tickets are decided.

Future Outlook and Recommendations:

Assamese women have always been political they simply haven't been "politicians." To bridge this gap, the state must move beyond symbolic representation. Assamese society has "heroic tradition" of "Mula Gabharu" and "Kanaklata" must finally find its permanent home in the debating halls of the Assam Legislative Assembly.

- **Legislative Reservation:** Implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill is crucial to guarantee at least 33% representation in legislature. A significant contrast is found at the local level with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Assam Panchayat Raj Act which provides a 50% reservation for women and this has brought thousands of women into local self-governance, providing them with vital administrative experience.

So, if similar reservation for the State Assembly or Parliament is existed than women participation is possible.

- **Internal Party Reforms:** Political parties and mostly National and State political party must voluntarily adopt quotas or given preference to women in candidate selection and leadership hierarchies. The out look of each political party must be changed and positive towards women.

- **Orientation programme:** Orientation or Refresher programme for women political leader for motivating and preparing them for electoral politics. The elected women of Panchayats may motivate and provide proper training to them for state and national-level leadership roles.

- **Economic Support:** We all know that now-a-days money plays a very crucial role in election and without money it was very difficult to contest and win in election. Creating state-funded or party-specific funds to support women candidates who lack independent wealth through which we can boost women in electoral politics. Financial independence is a prerequisite for political independence; without it, women candidates remain proxies for male relatives.

- **Educational improvements:** Education is the key of women political participation in politics of Assam. The course and curriculum must be prepared such a way where from the beginning girls are interested in politics and electoral politics.

- **Party Accountability:** The political party must be set up with high level ideology in terms of giving party tickets to women. There must be a specific strict provision where the party must provide party tickets to the women candidate. Political parties must be mandated to report gender-wise ticket distribution to the authority and to the public.

Without these systemic changes, the women of Assam will continue to be the state's most dedicated voters but its most ignored leaders.

Conclusion

The contemporary formal post-independence political arena remains a heavily dominated by male. The marginalization of women in Assam's legislative politics is a structural failure of largest democracy of the world. While educational improvements and reservations are steps in the right direction, they are insufficient on their own. Women are not only the voters but they are the kingmaker of Assam politics. Less representation in Assam Legislative Assembly represents the true picture of women status and empowerment.

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