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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF ASSAMESE WOMEN: AN EXTENSIVE STUDY FROM MID-EIGHTEEN ONWARDS.

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Abstract

Women's political participation has been the agenda of various international conferences and symposiums. Various recommendations were made to improve the participation of women in political decision making. Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Demographically according to 2011 census women constitute half of the total populations of our country (49.5%). But the women have been politically marginalized in our country and most of them live restricted life. Most of the countries in the world have failed to give due space and representation to women in politics. The issue of women's political empowerment comes to the forefront of the global debate for women's right at the time of the Forth-World Conference on women held at Beijing in 1995. It declared women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. The root to the participation of women in politics can be traced back to 19th century reform movement. The early 19th century social reforms and educational programmes initiated by various social reforms deals with the social evils prevalent in the society. The struggle for freedom marked the beginning of a political awakening among women in India. In the context of Assam, despite having a glorious history of women, they could not occupy good position in decision making process and party politics. This paper tries to highlight the role of Assamese women in political participation.

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Introduction:-

Early human society is invariably characterized by social differentiations. Among such differentiations, gender based difference is one. Historical records show that the role of women in our society as well as home always subordinated to men. The historical analysis of the position of women in ancient India shows that women did not share an equal position with men. Women were recognized only as a wives and a mother. But in later times movement like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism made certain effects to improve the status of women.

The Bhakti movement allowed women to undertake spiritual activities independently. But the participation of women of the country up to the 19th century state policy was restricted only to the member of royal noble families. The social-economic condition of that time was not favourable for womanhood to take part in the political sphere. In any political system right from the development to the developing countries presence of women is very low compared to men. Today the percentage of women as voters has increased considerably, but their political participation not equal to men. Women who consist of almost half of the population need to be represented significantly in decision making bodies; otherwise the goal of development cannot be achieved. Gender equality is very essential for the progress of any society. The struggle for freedom marked the beginning of a political awakening among women in India as well as Assam.

Objectives of the study:-

The objectives of the study are as follows-

- To see the foundation of political participation of women was laid down during the national movement.
- To see the role of women in representation and decision making process of politics
- It is observed that socio-religious reform movement help the women to know their right and duties.

Methodology:-

The present study has been based on primary and secondary data. AS primary source the interview method is applied and secondary data collected and reviewed based on Govt. records, books, journals and articles etc. The method of research is purely descriptive in nature.

Political participation of women before independence:-

The status of women since ancient times in India has seen many ups and down. The root of women participation in politics can be traced back to 19th century social reform movement. The social reform movement has been regarded as a key to intellectual processes that went into the making of modern India. The social reformers raised their voices against the prevailing practices and social customs that subjugating women. The new revivalism was embodied in powerful organization such as Arya Samaj, Ramkrishna Mission and Annie Besant's Madras Hindu Association.

The social reform movement brought in some minor changes and no drastic change in the position of women was brought in. But it is considered as the movement that laid the foundation for women's movement that followed later on.

Assam's independent status being lost only after the signing of Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The glorious history of our country's struggle for freedom can be traced as far back as the Revolt of 1857. But first nationwide movement for freedom with a broad and popular base began only in the year 1921. The Non-Cooperation movement was the movement that reveals the spiritual power of Indian womanhood, and the Assamese women, too, can forward to share the glory. The women of Assam played a significant role between 1920's to 1940's organizing themselves as Mahila Samiti. The first Mahila Samiti was established at Dibrugarh in 1915 followed by another at Nagaon in 1971 and the next at Tezpur in 1919 that were based on Gandhian ideologies. In 1926, the state level Mahila Samiti was formed under the name of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti. Chandraprabha Saikiani was the secretary of this body which resulted to formation of various other district and primary or village level Mahila Samiti. The aims and objectives of these samities were to welfare of children and maternity, mass education, social reform and weaving project. Large number of women joined in the movement by participating in meeting, organizing procession and boycotting schools, courts and offices. Under the able leadership of brave patriot like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Tarunram Phukan, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and Chandra Kumar Agarwala some Assamese women mostly from urban area came forward to take up organizational and publicity work among the rural women. They were namely Hemalata Kumari, Devi Bordoloi, Nalinibala Devi, Bijuli Phukan, Sumitra Bhattacharya, Kiranmayee Agarwala, Rajbala Das etc.

It is M.K.Gandhi who drew large number of women into the freedom struggle. The participation of women in India's historic freedom struggle was a country wide phenomenon. Through his experiment with satyagrah (peaceful strike), he realize that women could equally participate together with men. The main contribution of Gandhi to the women lay in his absolute and unequivaled insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and society. Gandhi succeeded in galvanizing the traditional capacity to sacrifice which emphasized by Gandhi in an effort to mobilize women.

In the struggle that followed during 1930-31, the Assamese women took a leading part with the young generation of the land. The promotion of spinning and weaving was one of the major constructive programme under Gandhijis national struggle movement. In this regard Assamese women achievements were remarkable. Almost all the women of Assam were efficient in spinning and weaving. The boycott of foreign clothes was highly successful in Assam due to the large scale production of Khadi. The women of Assam also participated in the programs of picketing the opium and liquor shops. They also picketed in front of the educational institution to keep the students away from taking lesson in any government school. During the period of Civil Disobedience movement in 1930 some girl students of Assam decided to start a revolutionary organization called the 'Mukti Sangha'. Puspallata Das was the general secretary of this body. Realizing the increasing participation of women in freedom movement, the congress

working committee decided to open a women's wing of congress at the National and provincial level in 1940s. As a result, the women's wing in Assam was opened in September in 1940. Puspallata Das and Amolprabha were the joint secretaries.

Quit India Movement and Women Participation:-

Gandhiji's quit India movement were two types of programs. One was constructive and the other was obstructive and destructive. In most urban areas, both boys and girls continued to play an active part. They not only boycotting their educational institution but also by organizing themselves into Death Squads known as 'Mrityu Bahini'. We come across only a few people who were willing to join the Death Squad, but a few workers whom we found left an indelible mark on the history of our country. They were Kanaklata Barua of Gahpur, at Dhekiajuli Kumali Nath Kakati, Tuleswari Devi, Padumi Nath, at Barhampur Nagaon Bhogeswari Phukanani etc. Thus we find that in all the major movement for freedom, the women of Assam always played the historic roles and contributed substantially towards the success of the movement

Women Political Participation after the Independence:-

Despite having a great role in politics of Pre- independent period the number of participation of women in politics remained very low in post-independent period. Women who consist of almost half of the population were remain away from the policy making and decision making process in different political institution. The only reason of this marginal role of women that male dominated society does not favoured women participation in politics. Where man occupies the public spheres, women are confined to the private domain. However private domain is also guided by the patriarchs of family. The freedom struggle movement helps women to express their voice. Leadership qualities of women come out and it enhance their self confidence. Many freedom fighters later on become the member of Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha and became the inspiration of later generation. For example, Puspallata Das, who was a revolutionary activist became the member of Rajya Sabha from 1951 to 1961.

Table 1:-

Yr.of election.	1952	1957	1962	1967	1971	1977	1980	1984	1989	1991	1996	1999	2004	2009
Participants	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	0	0	7	9	9	4	11
Winner	0	2	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	2
Pc.	0	14.3	14.3	7.1	7.1	14.3	0	0	0	0	7.1	14.3	0	14.3

Source:Election commission of India

This table shows the percentage of Assamese women in Lok Sabha in relation to the total number of seat of Assam. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha seats and 7 for the Rajya Sabha. It is clear from the above data that the percentage of Assamese women participation in Lok Sabha since 1957 is almost same. Women's representation increased in 2009 general election, whereas out of 169 candidates 11 were female and 2 could manage to win the election. In case of Rajya Sabha representation, the number of women candidate is very low.

Assam has 126 constituencies but the participation of women in state legislature compared to its male counterpart is very low

Table 2:-

Yr.of election	1952	1957	1962	1967	1972	1978	1985	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011
Male contestant	449	304	402	486	510	N/A	1124	242	1012	861	927	8969
Female contestant	6	8	6	9	12	20	29	7	17	55	70	85
Female winner	2	5	4	6	8	1	5	5	6	10	13	14
Percent of female	1.58	3.96	3.17	4.76	6.43	.79	3.96	3.96	4.76	7.93	10.32	10.4

Source:Election Commission of India

This table shows the participation of women of Assam in state assembly election from 1952 to 2011 in relation to the total number of seat. This table shows very less number of female candidates in comparison to male contestants of state assembly election. Women could not able to fill up the reservation seat for them

Table 3:-

Stat	Lok Sabha	Vidhan Sabha	Panchayat
Andhra Pradesh	7.00%	8.16%	33.46%
Assam	14.29%	11.90%	36.89%
Bihar	7.50%	14.81%	50.00%
Chattisgarh	9.09%	11.11%	54.50%
Goa	nil	2.50%	32.33%
Gujarat	15.38%	6.59%	33.02%
Haryana	nil	10.00%	36.50%
Himachal Pradesh	nil	4.41%	50.11%
Jammu & Kashmir	16.69%	3.45%	nil
Jharkhand	nil	9.88%	58.56%
Karnataka	3.57%	1.33%	43.62%
Kerala	5.00%	5.00%	51.85%
Madhya Pradesh	17.24%	13.48%	50.47%
Maharashtra	10.42%	3.82%	49.93%
Odisha	9.52%	4.76%	nil
Punjab	7.69%	11.96%	34.93%
Rajasthan	4.00%	14.00%	50.00%
Tamil Nadu	10.26%	7.26%	35.00%
Tripura	nil	8.33%	36.01%
Uttar Pradesh	16.25%	8.93%	39.99%
Uttarakhand	20.00%	7.14%	56.13%
West Bengal	28.57%	11.56%	38.43%

Measurement of women's political participation at local level: India Express

India is a federal country. Article 40 of the constitution of India indicates the decentralization and the distribution of power between the central and state with the provision of establishment of village panchayat. Table no 3 shows actually the data of 2006 local level political participation of women in various states of India. The 2006 panchayat election show the slight increase in the number of representation of the local level Govt. out of 23453 representations in panchayat 8977 were female. Though, the number of women participant in local self govt. is better than the women representation in Assembly and Lok Sabha election it is very low in comparison to male representation. It just managed to cross the 33% quota of women reservation seat.

Since the first election the number of women voters is very impressive. According to the 2001 census report, out of 174, 43,617 the total number of women voters were 84, 31,467 and it constitute approximately 40% of the total voters. However, in the legislative election of 2006 women voters increased up to 70% .The percentage of women voters of the 2006 assembly election was 74.96% as compared to 76.64% of male voters. The voter of national level election is also high in Assam, their average percentage is 66.80% in Lok Sabha election Though the percentage of women voters increased considerably, still they are lagging behind the decision making power.

Result of the Study:-

The result of the study is that women political participation was started from the freedom struggle movement. Though in this period of struggle movement Assamese women took active part and came out from the household affairs and started the political journey from the middle half of 19th century. Yet they are regarded as the second citizen of the country as well as states. Illiteracy is the foremost reason which marginalized the participation of women especially in village level political field. Till now in some areas of our country women were regarded as the domestic help. They did not allow to take education as per with men. Another cause is domestic responsibility of women and workload. It made difficult for them to spare enough time in politics and other field also. They are always held by a man back to her. So, they are handicapped in politics and cannot cultivate a close association with men. In independent India politics has been found very inhospitable for Indian women. It is because of extreme gender discrimination. Political participation is not just casting vote, it include wide range of other activities like membership of political party, electoral campaigning, attending party meeting, holding party position, demonstration, contesting election, membership in representative bodies, influencing decision making and other related activities. So, in all sphere of political field a few women achieved success as compared to male counterpart.

Conclusion:-

Political power is the strongest weapon to empower women. It depends on the political system of that country or state. In a country women's participation in mainstream political activities makes the system more democratic and has broadened the areas of governance. Education remains as a determining factor of any kind of role to be played by men or women in the outer World. In the context of Assam, despite having a glorious history of the women, they could not occupy good position in decision making process and leading role in party politics. Despite having a great role in politics of pre-independent period the number of participation of women in politics remained very low in post-independent period. From the very beginning women have become able to occupy few seats both at parliament and state legislative assembly. Thus, it is an imperative necessity to provide opportunity to women in the decision making process at all level to make empowerment of women. To make women aware about politics, there is need of mass literacy programs for the eradication of illiteracy. Moreover, an awareness campaign about women's political and legal right should be organized monthly or quarterly especially in rural areas. A nations march towards progress and prosperity remains a dream, its aspiration unfulfilled and unrealized unless women actively participated in all development activities of that country.

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