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RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNVEILING WOMEN'S VOICE IN REPRESENTATION A STUDY ON KARBI WOMEN IN ASSAM'S KARBI ANGLONG DISTRICT.

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Abstract

Gender and politics entails significance in view to women's thin representation in the formal political institutions. The increasing crime against women in recent times shows no sign of abnegation since the male-centric policies have failed to address women's plight. The transformation of the feudal social system in India to liberalization and subsequently globalization has altered the pattern of violence on women into more brazen, horrified and intensely traumatic. Patriarchy that sustains unequal power relations is one of the dominant reasons for the perpetration of violence on women. In view to this, the leadership of women could be the panacea in liberating them from the discriminatory social customs and practices. In fact, the lacuna in the leadership of men in dealing with the crime against women could be plugged up with the entry of women in the decision making process. In fact, women's proactive role could ameliorate the women's cause through the delivery of social goods like health care, education, income and above all to deal effectively with the rising crime against women.

The North Eastern part of India suffers from connectivity lag, militancy, under development and leadership crisis wherein women suffers silently due to the lack of agency to reflect their plight and predicament. Karbi Anglong district suffers from a complex web of problems that the present leadership has failed to address due to their detachment from the grassroots people and engagement with their own interests. Women in such a situation are more vulnerable due to lack of gender sensitive policies. The funds are not being implemented at the behest of the beneficiaries and scanty representation of women in political institutions posits them and their pangs under the surface. Keeping this in view, the present paper endeavours to investigate the reasons for such scanty representation of women and the increasing influence of dynastic politics in the political landscape of Karbi Anglong. It equally attempts to explore the voice of the youths in regard to political representation of women and how such lacuna could be effectively addressed.

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Introduction:-

Gender and politics invites serious academic and research attention in recent years. The area of such research is extensive and diverse given the variations in class, caste, regions, religions and ethnicity. Joni Lovenduski's *Feminizing Politics* (2005) and Wendy Stokes's *Women in Contemporary politics* (2005) are the milestones in dealing with gender and politics. Lovenduski has aimed to draw the attention of the political scientists to the importance of gender to the study of politics. Gender and Politics scholarship has emerged as a "coherent sub field" in Great Britain. (Mackay 2004:113). America having being the oldest democracy in the world so far could not

alleviate any woman to the highest political office. The hitherto slim participation of women in the decision making process in various social and cultural set up has brought the issue of gender and politics to the forefront of political debate.

The issue of reservation of seats had come up in the Constitutional Assembly which was discarded by the women representatives in colonial India. This resurfaced after 25 years in the Committee of the Status of women given the invisibility and skewed empowerment of women especially in the rural sector (Menon1999:27). The massive involvement of women in the freedom struggle and subsequently in the movements against dowry, rape and protection of environment etc. has been willfully ignored due to the patriarchal mindset to devalue women's potential and talents that has kept them largely off-screen in the political offices.

The functioning of Indian democracy conspicuously shows relatively disempowered position of women. In the 16th Lok Sabha election in 2014, 61 women candidates won which is only 11.33% as against 89% male representation. Women are also under represented in various legislative assemblies, legislative councils, district and autonomous Councils, other tribal councils and Gaon Panchayats etc. This truly reflects pervasive gender gap and underscores the exigency of 33 percent reservations for women in the formal political institutions. The domination of men in the formal political structure could be cited as a significant factor that hindered women political empowerment (Bari 2005:4). Women's reservation Bill has travelled a coarse journey to the Parliament and is pending in the Lok Sabha after being passed by the Rajya Sabha. This is probably the reason why women in India trails back in gender equity since India ranks 101 out of 136 nations in gender Gap Index in 2013 (World Economic Forum 2013).

The North East India with the significant presence of tribes and communities represents a unique tradition wherein the social status of women is marginally better than the other social groups. Among the North Eastern States, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur show relatively lesser degree of gender inequality in terms of work participation, literacy, infant mortality and sex ratio. The situation is, however, adverse in case of Tripura, Assam and Sikkim. In Assam, gender gap is wide in enrolment rate and female infant mortality is also higher than that of male in the region. In regard to women's participation in the decision making process, none of the states in North East India could project an encouraging picture. Even the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo and Lalung women of Meghalaya who are parts of the matrilineal society hardly have decision making powers and their choices are limited. "The male elite have taken control of all decision-making in most matrilineal as well as patrilineal tribal societies of the northeast and interprets the customary law to their own benefit. Some men in matrilineal societies are demanding a changeover to male inheritance" (Khatso 2005:44). In many cases, women's participation in the formal political institutions is dismal.

Karbi Anglong district of Assam abounds in numerous tribes and communities wherein the ethnic Karbis occupy a predominant position. The British colonial Government created and recreated borders and boundaries for their administrative convenience after they colonised Assam in 1826. In the process, they created United Mikir Hill Tract and subsequently bracketed the district from the mainstream development. The isolation ultimately led to vicious circle of underdevelopment, endemic poverty and militancy in the district.

The Karbis, formerly known as Mikirs is one of the ethnic groups in the hill areas of Assam and constitutes the third largest tribal group in the state. Racially being a Mongloid group, they belong to the Kuki-chin group of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. They entered Assam from Central Asia and their original abode was the eastern portion of Khasi and Jaintia hills.

The formation of the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district came into being on 17 November, 1951. The Mikir Hills District Council was set up on 23 June, 1952 which was alleviated to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council in 1995. The district was bifurcated in 1970 as 'Mikir Hills' and 'North Cachar Hills' and the Mikir Hills was again rechristened as Karbi Anglong on 14 of October, 1976. This led Karbi Anglong to emerge as a full fledged district in the map of Assam with its headquarter in Diphu.

The policy makers in the post colonial India sensing the gravity of the situation zealously designed the sixth schedule to bring the backward people into the political mainstream. Even after sixty four years of the formation of the Council, women's participation in the decision making process remains noticeably dismal. In fact, women are the equal stakeholders in the democratic process as men but their thin presence in the decision making process derail their empowerment.

Materials and Methods:-

It is a common belief that political representation is largely an avenue for man and woman lack leadership skill and potential. The hegemony of the male in the Indian society locates them as active agents to deny women's access to political offices as well as in government sponsored schemes. However, the situation has been gradually changing due to the exposure of women to education and given their growing political consciousness.

Karbi Anglong district represents an interesting case in terms of increasing trend of representation of women from the dynastic families. It is pertinent to mention that political power is largely the monopoly of a few dynastic families in the district and there is sharp rivalry between them. A few women so far have made inroads into the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council are from the political dynasties wherein the decisions crafted out by them probably reflects the voice of the male member of their families. Women who contested individually fail to win so far except in one case. In post colonial India, no woman of the district so far marked their presence as decision makers in the Assam Legislative Assembly and only one Karbi woman so far was elected to the Parliament way back to the 50's. In order to trace the lacuna, the present paper is an attempt to investigate the reasons of women's slim participation in the decision making process and the increasing trend of women's political representation as agents of dynastic politics. It also seeks to study the political response of the young people of the district in regard to women's participation in the decision making process. Hence the spotlight is on juxtaposition of gender in politics as a public activity and the need for adequate political representation of women in dispensing gender justice and emancipation of women. We have chosen the Karbi women primarily due to the fact that women from the other minority sixth schedule tribes in the district so far could not make any representation in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.

In order to conduct the study we used both primary data as well as secondary data. The data was however collected through random sampling. We used 30 samples to conduct the study. The sample consists of diverse groups--students, student leaders, elected members (both male and female), media persons and intellectuals. We administered a questionnaire to the respondents and in many cases conducted informal interactive sessions with them also to understand different strands of the problem. The use of historical, sociological and anthological method is considered pertinent to conduct the study.

Status of women in the Karbi society:-

In order to understand the political representation of Karbi women, it is pertinent to trace their social and political status as figured out in the customary laws since the Karbi society is actually governed by it. They follow the patriarchal system of family structure wherein the father is the head of the family and his authority is undisputed (Das 2012:58). The status of women in such society evokes diverse opinions. Some scholars are of the opinion that women enjoy a high status in the Karbi society (Terangpi 1993), some others articulated their equal status (Sarma Thakur 1993). Whereas some others consider that the Karbi women endure low status in the society (Bora 1993: Rongpi-Gogoi 1993).

There are some who believed that though the Karbi women enjoy a higher status but are not equal to their male counterparts (Terang 1993: Fernandes 2002). It is however, pertinent to take into account what Udai Bhanu Pandey observed: "While making a right assessment of the status of a woman in the Karbi society so many complex factors are to be taken into accounts" (Pandey 1993:44). The women in such a social system are an inalienable part of the traditional economy and play a significant role in the jhum cultivation. Tado Terangpi observed that "they are fortunate enough not to suffer social evils like sati, female infanticide, child marriage or the dowry system" (Terangpi 1993:23). The consent of the girl is very important in the settlement of marriage (Rongpi Gogoi 1993:30). The social structure is patriarchal (Bora 1993:1) and Lineage/descents can be defined /traced from the father's known as Po-tung and also mothers known as Pi- tung. The bi-lateral descent is based on male inheritance (Teron 2007:127). A female cannot change her father's surname.

The practice of bride price is conspicuous in its absence in the Karbi customary law. Instead, the system of bride earning is prevalent in such a system wherein a young man is to work in the house of the girl for some years before they can tie the nuptial knot (ibid). In Chomangkan festival (death ceremony of the Karbis) Uchepi (female diviner) play the role of an expert and without whom the death ceremony and the death rituals cannot not be performed (SarmaThakur 1993:7).

There is no representation or leadership of women in the traditional village council or other administrative bodies. They are not even permitted to attend a village court for any trial. Women are also deprived of the inheritance rights. These examples clearly show an unequal status of women in the traditional, political as well as customary legal settings. "In the field of traditional administration, a Karbi woman has no place in the society. There is no example of any woman becoming chief administrator, etc. such as Habey Burtimar, or Sarthe, for instance, in the society" (Phangcho 1993:20).

Fernandes and Menon observed that "in most tribal communities, the women were in charge of the family. She controlled its decisions and economy. The man represented the family in society. So village council was made up of men alone" (Fernandes and Menon 1987:117-119). P.C Phangcho highlighted that "old legends and story give clue to visualize that even with extraordinary quality; a woman cannot occupy high position in the social and administrative hierarchy of a Karbi society" (Phangcho 1993:1). Longkam Teron observed that "A Karbi woman can easily take part in politics. She can exercise her fundamental rights in politics conferred by the Indian Constitution at present. There is no bar/restriction to have education, service of any category. They are free to wear dresses besides their own community dress which they prefer" (Teron 2007:20).

From the above, we could reasonably argue that although Karbi women enjoy certain rights in the society and an equal partner in the decision making in the family, they have to bear with certain discriminations too. The complex interplay of factors in regard to women's status and increasingly changing roles locate the Karbi women not very near to the egalitarian society.

Modernization, cultural assimilation and changes in the economy have entailed an enormous change in the customary laws. The advent of market economy has brought significant changes in the tribal society and economy. Given the transition from community ownership of property to the private one, women's role in the family economy began to decline. Women had decision making powers in the family as long as the resources belonged to the community. Due to the encouragement of settled cultivation and derecognition of jhum cultivation, women's status continues to decline in the Karbi society.

Political empowerment is primarily linked with literacy, educational opportunities, economic self-sufficiency, decision making power and political consciousness etc. The laxity in governance of the colonial and post colonial policy makers at the state and district level have serious implications in the education, health, career prospects, economic self sufficiency and consequent decision making capability etc. Due to lack of implementation of the schemes despite pouring in of funds having being a sixth scheduled distinct and apathy of the decision makers to the plight of the people, sufferings of the people reached to its zenith. Women as marginalised section suffer the brunt more severely. In most cases, women suffer from health related problems like malaria, anemia and mal nutrition etc.

I Women's organisations and their politicization:-

Karbi Nimso Chingthur Asong is one of the women's organisations in the district. It was set up on 1st August 1986 at Dongkamukam. Seema Ronghangpi was the founder president and Anjoli Teronpi was the general secretary. Initially it was a woman organisation with 49 members constituted with the aim of protecting the rights of women, to reduce gender discrimination and violence on women and to create political awareness among the women etc. The regional committees were set up in district headquarter of Diphu, and other areas-- Parokhowa, Bokajan and Hamren. Each regional committee has its president and secretary. At present, the Diphu Regional Committee has 48 members. They raise the funds from among themselves and hardly could solicit funds from the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council perhaps due to their ideological differences with the ruling Congress. The present secretary and the president of the organisation are Kajeck Tokbiki and Merina Beypi respectively. The post of the advisor is presently adorned by Rongdir Teronpi.. The 1st general conference of the organisation was held at Rongmongve. Every year they observe International Women's Day on 8 March. The organisation sends their representation to various national and international forums. In 1985, they participated in the Beijing Conference, in South Asian Women's Conference in 2003, Asia Indigenous Peoples' Conference in 2012 Preparatory Committee for World Economic Conference etc. The office bearers of KNCA insisted that "among the women's organisation in Assam, they are involved in a large number of activities" (My interview with Seema Ronghangpi on 12 March 2015). Several times they remained vocal about the social and women's issues and launched demonstrations in several occasions. They staged dharna at Jantar Mantar, Delhi Assam secretariat at Dispur and near Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council office regarding the 33% of seats for women in the Parliament, assembly and Autonomous Council etc. (narrated in an interview by Basopi Taropi on 14 April, 2015).

At the time of formation of the organisation, there was a vociferous demand for the Autonomous State for Karbi Anglong. Earlier on 17 May 1986, the Autonomous State Demand Committee was formed as a regional political party for the creation of an Autonomous state to safeguard the language, culture and tradition of the hill people of North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong (Bhuyan1989:82).. The party leaders requested the KNCA to join in the ASDC to carry forward the movement wholeheartedly (narrated in an interview by Seema Ronghangpi on 12 May 2016). In 1989, the Autonomous State demand committee joined hands with KNCA. They were actively involved in the ASDC movement for autonomous state. The movement for Autonomous state geared up in Karbi Anglong with Karbi Students Association, KNCA and ASDC in the forefront from the middle of 1986 (Teron 2014:43). Thousands of people including a large number of women came out in the streets for clamouring their demands for autonomous state due to the persistent efforts of the KNCA. To make the movement much stronger and to curb violence on women, the office bearers reinforced in hierarchical structure of the organisation with the formation of branch committees in the villages. Two or three villages were put up in one branch. had to submit reports to the Regional Committees and the Regional Committees transmitted these to the Central committee (My conversation with Basopi Taropi on 12 April, 2016) However, in a conference, the members of the KNCA discussed that since the Autonomous movement had thinned down, they would distance themselves from the ASDC or any political party and resume their primary objectives of women's emancipation. Regarding the issue, disagreement cropped up among the members and some members lent their support in favour of the decision while some others opposed it. The disagreement ultimately led to the division of the KNCA. Meanwhile, dissension and strife emerged within the ASDC. Some top ranking leaders like Jayanta Rongpi and Holiram Terang already had the formal membership in the CPI (ML) and Rongpi promised that he would not expand the party in Karbi Anglong by enrolling members into it. But soon allegations were raised against him about the undemocratic behaviour and attempts of merging the ASDC into the stronghold of the CPI(ML)(Rongphar2005:196). In a drive of intense protest, Holiram Terang submitted his resignation on 9 September 1991 as a member of the Central Council of ASDC. The resignation letter was addressed to the Secretary General Jayanta Rongpi alleging his attempt to sway the associate organisations of ASDC like KSA, KNCA, Karmachari Samanoy Samiti, Farming Society into CPI(ML) Liberation party(*ibid*) The leaders of the ASDC were of the opinion that top ranking leaders of the CPI (ML) and their Central committee monopolised the appointments etc. and imposed the decisions on the party members. The conflict between CPI (ML) and the ASDC eclipsed the KNCA. In 2000, ASDC was formally divided into two—ASDC (H) led by Holiram Terang and ASDC (P) led by Jayanta Rongpi (*ibid*). This division led to the division of KNCA-- one group of the KNCA stayed with ASDC (H) and the other group with ASDC (P). In 2012, People's Alliance for Peace Agreement came into being and ASDC (P) joined with PAPA. One group of KNCA joined with ASDC (P) and the other group remained with ASDC (H)(*ibid*).

The Women Council of the KNCA has direct communication with their respective political parties. The present convenors of the women Council are: Pratima Engtipi and Merina Beypi (My conversation with Basapi Taropi on 16 May 2016).

Karbi So-Arlo Anei (KARSAW):-

It was formed on 25th June 1987 at Donkamukam under Hamren sub division in Karbi Anglong district. The motto of the KARSAW is unity, awareness and preservation (The constitution of KARSAW 2008:2). The objectives of the KARSAW are: to uplift Karbi women by spreading and popularising education among them and to create awareness of their rights and responsibilities, preservation and promotion of Karbi culture. There is a Central Executive Committee for the KARSAW consisting of the president, other office bearers and executive members. There are regional committees and branch committees as well. The qualifications for election are: she is a general permanent member of the KARSAW and she is not a member of any political party (*ibid*). The present secretary of KARSAW is Beena Terangpi and the president is Kungri Timungpi (My conversation with Kungri Timungpi on 11 April 2016).

Though the office bearers of KARSAW claim it to as a social organisation, it is actually aided by the Congress party and known to be its associate organisation. The KARSAW celebrate their foundation day with grants from the KAAC. Cases of violence against women are generally solved by KNCA. But if a particular case is more serious, the KNCA office bearers invite the KARSAW to join them in resolving the case. Kungri Timungpi, the president of KARSAW narrated that the Congress leadership does not discuss politics with them. For this purpose, they discuss the matter with Mahilla Congress members (My interview with Kungri Timungpi on 12 April, 2015).

Oral Narratives:-

Interactions with the women executive member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, students, civil society groups, media persons and women organizations, we gathered information about the extent of political participation of women in the KAAC and the lacuna of such thin participation.

Some respondents are of the opinion that women are not interested in politics. They are interested in a more secured job (My conversation with Kadam Terangpi on 4 March 2015). Merina Kropi narrated that girls are interested in careers like college teachers, law and civil service etc. and have little concern about politics around them. Some others articulated that politics is not women's cup of tea. Rather, they are more interested in caring their household (My conversation with Hunmili Hansapi on 25 March 2015). There are some respondents who articulated that due to lack of political consciousness and women's traditional role as caregivers, woman's participation in politics is noticeably slim.

Illish Ingtipi who has been serving presently as an executive member in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council previously worked as a primary school teacher and joined politics only after her retirement. In her service tenure, she shied away from political representation due to insecurity related to it given the career prospects of her children (My interview with Illish Ingtipi on 12 April 2015).

Some office bearers or women organisations are of the opinion that fear of women being defeated is one of the reasons that the contestants in the elections are predominantly male. The male-dominated society is more or less responsible for women's poor participation in the political institutions (My interview with Kajek Ingtipi on 2 March 2014). Some others are of the opinion that due to illiteracy and economic dependency women are still lagging behind in the decision making. Moreover, those women who contested election so far except dynastic families largely have failed to win. It shows that the voters of Karbi Anglong yet to repose their faith in the leadership of women and this is one of the reasons for slim political representation in the district (My interview with Samson Tisso on 19 March 2013).

There are some others who endorsed that male members of the family are not willing in women's participation in politics. Kache Daropi articulated that her political ambition was incinerated by her husband's prejudices about women's participation in politics. She expressed that she would shape her daughter's career in politics after the completion of her studies. She highlighted that women are the policy makers but men are implementing the policies at the family level. Hence, men are less inclined to allow women to implement policies in public life (My conversation with Kache Daropi in 12 March 2015).

Harsing Engti narrated that women are not interested in politics. Rather, they are interested in securing a good job. They choose to remain confined in their private lives. He endorsed that women's problem could be addressed effectively with large scale participation of women in politics (My conversation with Harsing Engti on 12 September 2016).

Rori Rongpipi narrated that women are less free to attend meetings etc. due to the enormous responsibilities in the household—rearing and caring their children, ailing family members and old and infirm etc. Some are office goers and getting exhausted in between work and home. She expressed her confidence to the leadership potential of women and hopeful that once women would be given opportunities and support, there would be qualitative changes in the decision making in politics (My interview with Rori Rongpipi on 12 March 2015).

Jitu Engti articulated that in the present scenario, politics is trivialized due to criminalisation in politics and high level of corruption. Perhaps due to this, women prefer not to get embroiled in it. Women are more matured and their entry into politics in large number would curve the ominous forces in politics (Narrated in an interview by Jitu Engti on 10 March 2015).

Easterson said that politics is not dirty until and unless people indulge in corruption. Since women constitute half of the population, they should contest election for a better society. He expressed his reluctance to give a clean cheat to women in corruption and endorsed that it is not the gender difference but the good conscience that keeps one politically moral and committed in delivering public goods (My conversation with Easterson on 12 March 2015).

Results and Discussion:-

The political inroads to power in the Sixth schedule district is administered almost without a voice representing the plight of women. A large segment of the Karbi women living particularly in the interior areas of the district is yet to get the exposure of literacy. The female literacy level is lowest among the Karbis. Education attainment of the Karbi women has the lowest scores in both urban and rural areas (urban 2.88 percent and rural 0.26 percent). It is pertinent to mention that drop out of the girls are more than the boys perhaps due to the responsibility entrusted to the girls to look after the younger siblings in the absence of mother from home who are indispensable part of the Jhum cultivation. The financial condition does not support them in enrolling all the children to school. Moreover, most of the High schools are far away from their villages and they have to walk miles together to reach their school on foot which is absolutely difficult for girls. This is another significant reason of female dropout in the impoverished rural sector in Karbi Anglong. Lack of education, economic dependency, lack of access to ownership of productive resources and work participation limit the scope of their political participation. Hence a large gender gap exists in political participation at the national, state and district level.

The prevailing records show that the women who contested elections in recent past failed to win largely except those who are the part of the dynastic politics. In the 7th the Karbi Anglong District Council election held in the year 1989, Patorpi Tissopi contested as the sole woman candidate. She could garner only 23 votes that is 0.38 percent of the total votes cast (Rongphar 2004:11). She contested as an independent candidate and lost to Jotson Bey of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) from the Socheng constituency. P.C Phangcho argues that "Patorpi Tissopi's contest indicated the growing political consciousness of the women in recent times" (Phangchoo1993:20).

In the 8th Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council election held in 1996, two women candidates contested. Kabon Engtipi with ASDC ticket from No.8 Hamren constituency got elected with 5,383 i.e. 87.79 percent of valid votes (Rongphar 2004:28). So far she is the only woman candidate elected to KAAC outside the political dynasty. Another woman candidate was Merina Beypi who contested with ASDC ticket but was defeated by Ramsing Munda, an independent candidate supported by Mancha Sanghatan from 24 Deopani Constituency. She garnered 5,094 votes, that is 46.88 percent of the total votes (ibid: 281). The dissension between ASDC and CPI (ML) took a dramatic turn on 20 July 2000 wherein the Chief executive member Jotson Bey was expelled by Jayanta Rongpipi (ibid) Mojari Hanse was appointed as the Chief Executive member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council wherein Kabon Engtipi was appointed as one of the executive members. Meanwhile, Jarow Mohan Basumatary became the General secretary of the United People's Front created in a Convention at Langhin on 4th July,1996. He was one of the executive members of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and was killed by an unidentified Bodo militant. Meanwhile, Bikash Boro (Ronkhang constituency) who won as an independent candidate in the 8th Autonomous Council election and a Executive member in Mojari Hanse's government resigned and later on joined in United People's Front (Rongphar 2005:322). With it Mojari Hanse's government turned into a minority government. Lots of political drama took place and ultimately with the intervention of the Governor the political deadlock was resolved. The term of Mojari Hanse was (31-07-2000 to 15-03-2001){Karbi Anglong at a Glance: DIPRO, Karbi Anglong, Diphu}. In this situation, Kabon Engtipi's term as EM was short-lived (narrated in an interface by Rameshwar Chauhan on 12 June 2015).

In the 9th Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council election in 2001, five women candidates contested (3.40 percent). Maina Rongpipi contested as an independent candidate from 9-- Amreng constituency and was able to garner only 320 votes (1.81 %) (Rongphar 2004:30). Padumi Das contested as an INC candidate from 13-Langhin constituency and garnered 1,862 votes (10.53%)(ibid). Kajak Tokbiki contested as a CPI (ML) candidate from 14- Korkanthi constituency who got 2,571 votes (20.25%) (ibid), Pratima Engtipi contested as a CPI(ML) candidate from the 16-Nomati constituency and scored 1,124 votes (11.03%)(ibid33), Mary Lotha contested as an independent candidate from 21-Borjan constituency and garnered only 282 votes (1.46%)(ibid34).

In the 10th Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council election held in 2007, altogether 7 female candidates contested. Amphu Tissopi contested with ASDC(H) ticket from the 6 Bithung Rengthema constituency and garnered 4,148 votes (Rongphar 2004:41) Junaki Englengpi contested from the same constituency and garnered only 54 votes(ibid) Pratima Enghepi contested from the 9 Amreng Constituency with CPI(ML) ticket and garnered 4868 votes (ibid 42), Moina Rongpipi with KAPP ticket and scored 1,116 votes (ibid), Premola Beypi contested from the 10-Howraghat constituency with INC ticket and garnered 8724 votes and declared elected (ibid43), Kuntila Ronghangpi contested from the 18 Lumbajan constituency as an INC candidate and garnered 12,310 votes and declared elected. She is the wife of parliamentary secretary of Assam legislative assembly Bidyasing Engleng (Rongphar 2004:51). Sabita K.Marak contested from the 24- Deopani constituency and got 144 votes (ibid 57). In the KAAC Autonomous

Council election 2012 Sandhya Rani Sangma, contested as the only female candidate with a Bharatiya Janata Party ticket.

In the 8th Bidhan Sabha election of Assam in 1985, Suniti D. Sangma contested as an independent candidate and scored 1,751 votes (5.26%). In the 9th Bidhan Sabha election in 1991, Kabon Timungpi contested as an independent candidate and secured 228 votes (0.41%). In the 10th Bidhan Sabha election in 1996, Suniti D. Sangma again contested from the 17 Bokajan constituency and garnered only 328 votes (0.56%). In the same election, another female candidate Kabon Timungpi contested from the 19 Diphu (ST) constituency and scored 161 votes (0.22%). In the 12th Bidhan Sabha election, Pratima Engtipi contested from the 20-Baithalangso constituency with CPI (ML) ticket and scored 7,101 votes (5.94%). In the 11th Lok Sabha General election in 1996, Kabon Timungpi contested as an independent candidate and secured 687 votes (0.20%). In the 13th Lok Sabha election in 1999, Kabon Timungpi contested as an independent candidate and secured 1,715 votes (0.44%). In the 15th Lok Sabha election (3rd Autonomous District (ST) in 2009, Kabon Timungpi contested as an independent candidate and garnered 10,417 votes (2.16%) (Rongphar 2004). In the 16th Lok Sabha election, 2014, no female candidate contested from Karbi Anglong (3rd Autonomous District (ST)).

In the present KAAC, there are three women executive members who got elected through family dynasties—Illish Ingtipi, Kacche Rongpipi and Promella Beypi. Illish Ingtipi is the sister of the Human Resource Development Minister in the last cabinet of the Legislative Assembly of Assam, Khorsing Engti and, Premola Beypi is his wife. Kacche Rongpipi is the wife of KAAC Executive member Bhuvan Chandra Terang who died in harness in 2014. Due to this, a bye election was conducted to fill the vacancy wherein Kacche Rongpipi got elected (My conversation with Hanuram Terang on 15 March 2015).

Venkato Rao observed that “in Mikir Hills, power is concentrated in a few families although there is political rivalry between them.....Although power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of a few families, there is rivalry between them and it may continue as long as there is no challenge to the monopoly of power by them. If a rival group comes up and claims a share in the spoils of office, all these families related to one another may sink their differences and gang up against the group. But the fact remains that there is no possibility of any such group coming into existence in the foreseeable future” (Rao 1987:261). Women also lack opportunities to win election without the patronage of male leaders or mentors.

In recent past no Karbi woman could alleviate to the Assam Legislative Assembly or other Assembly or in the Parliament. Way Back to 1937 election, Kabon Neli Timungpi was elected as an MLA of undivided colonial Assam from Shillong Legislative Assembly Constituency that was reserved for women (Sahid 2015:76). She was elected to the legislative Assembly election in 1946 as an Indian National Congress candidate and secured 1,454 votes out of 2,878 votes, i.e. 50.52 percent of the votes cast. Her rivals in that election were Mevich Daan, T.W Chadap and Berlina Dingdo (ibid). She held the office of the Deputy Speaker of Assam Legislative Assembly from 1946 to 1951. She was elected as the member of Parliament in 1951 in independent India's first general election (Chapbangpi 2015: 73). She defeated Donaldson Bachan and Bilson Read and secured 59,326 votes out of total votes of 1,09,663 (54.09%). She earned the accolades for being the first woman M.P from the entire North Eastern Region (ibid).

In recent times, various ethnic strife, militancy etc. perniciously affected the normal life of the people of the district. Consequently, the district represented the worst cases of human right violations by the armed militant groups as well as by paramilitary forces. Dharamsingh Teron observed that “The systematic violations of human rights in Karbi Anglong can be comprehended from the fact that the ‘Assam Disturbed Areas Act 1955’ was in operation along the boundary of Karbi Anglong and Naga Hills almost immediately after the inauguration of the new district in 1951” (Teron 2011:163). In such a situation, women suffered as the most vulnerable victims.

In recent ethnic clashes in the Karbi Anglong district, the worst sufferers were the women and children. Even the infants were not spared in such mindless violence. It is interesting to note that a couple of Karbi women joined the militant groups. Even among them, the women could not garner leadership role. Perhaps due to militancy, women were not engaged in election duties after 1992. In the 2016 Assam legislative Assembly election, women were provided election duties as presiding officers, polling officers and female web caster etc. in the female constituencies as per a direction by the election Commission. It is due to this women government personnel got the opportunity to participate in the electoral process.

It is found from the oral narratives that politics for many is an occupation rather than as a public service particularly to the young people of the district. It is also found that the journey of politics from its benevolent destination has reached to a malevolent one and it is almost synonymous with scandal corruption and misuse of power etc. There is hardly any political leader in the district in the present time who could project himself or herself as a role model and attract the potential leaders to commitment and responsibilities. The impression that goes to the young people is that by holding political offices in the district, one can enjoy a fabulously luxurious life.

It is found that in the 9th Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council election, out of 5 female candidates contested the election, no one could win. Their vote share in the said election is also remarkably low than their male counterparts. In the 10th Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council election, 7 female candidates contested among whom two won. Interestingly, both of them belong to the dynastic families and possibly won with the aid of the male patronage. We could reasonably argue that the voters of Karbi Anglong are yet to repose their faith in the leadership of women. The Political parties are also reluctant to field female candidates perhaps due to the fear of losing the battle. That is why those female who contested in the election outside the umbrella of dynastic families in recent times are without any banner of political party but as independent contestants.

It is pertinent to point out that equal political participation of men and women in politics are the prelude for a just society. Education and financial autonomy are the catalyst in facilitating women's capacity of decision making in various areas of life. It is observed that liberal and transparent administration provides security to the vulnerable group like women. Examples could be cited of Sweden, Norway and Denmark in which women have better access to education, work opportunity and a higher standard of living. Improving social status involves women acquires more decision making power in relation to men (Banu 2001, cited in Fernandes and Barbara 2002:6).

Conclusion:-

Gender and politics in Karbi Anglong is primarily woven in political dynasties wherein the elitist political class monopolise representation by virtue of their power and money. This is the historical fallacy that inexplicably promotes a handful of privileged few at the cost of underprivileged many. At one end, money flows to the luxury of the chosen few and at the other, the helpless many are held capsized by poverty, diseases and perennial struggle as dispossessed. The expansionist policy of such dynastic families to include and accommodate as many as family members into the policy making has been an ominous political force in Karbi Anglong politics and runs counter to the democratic principles and ideals enshrined by the preamble and the philosophy of the Indian Constitution. Even with the presence of three women executive members in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, the utterly disadvantaged and dispossessed condition of women did not change much.

It is found that enhanced participation of women in the decision making process could ameliorate the developmental scenario of the district since women are capable in solving problems. Their commitment and sense of responsibilities are well tested. Simultaneously, women must equip themselves in leadership skills to enable them to take up the increased responsibility in the public sphere. For this, they should come out of the stereo types of being the active agents of rearing and caring of children. In fact, they need to play a much wider role in the society. They must work much harder to get spaces in politics with skill development and determination. At the same time, it is equally important to create representation from the minority tribes as well. The women from the other communities are sustaining with the same plight and policy directives must accommodate their problems and aspirations too. Needless to say, more representation of women in the political institutions would ameliorate the district towards a fair destiny.

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