

Understanding North-East Woman's Participation in State Governance- A Power Dynamics

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Abstract- The northeastern states of India, popularly known as the Seven Sisters of India (Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh), along with their brother state Sikkim, stand out with their unique geographical location and are home to several multi-ethnic communities. The region has witnessed several ethnic uprisings following the complexities of autonomy-related movements, the integration process, and the share in the natural resources. Needless to say, with the kind of societal structure prevailing in this region, women's participation has been a major factor in ethnic movements in the past and even in the present. Indubitably, their participation in the societal and civil sphere of life is impressive. However, their involvement and presence in the larger political scenario, such as state institutions, are hardly felt.

The central inquiry of the paper is to analyse the role of women in ethno-political conflicts and parallelly examine the power-sharing dynamics of women in North-Eastern regions. Methodologically, this research involves a comprehensive study of documents from the Election Commission of India, focusing mainly on the percentage of women candidates in the northeast contesting in Lok Sabha elections from the time period of 2014 to 2024. Through the analysis of this data, the research will try to underscore the reason for the invisibility of women's role in larger power sharing where there is paradoxically huge participation of women in ethno-political issues.

Keywords: Women, North-Eastern Region, Ethno-Political Movements, Political Participation, Power Sharing

1. Introduction

Apparently, the unique features of the conflict in this region have been the nature and role of women in ethno-political conflict, in contrast to popular belief of women solely portraying as passive victim of conflict, women in north-east India have historically occupied active and influential role in conflict-both as resistance effort and peace-building process. Their engagement in the region's ethno-political space is deeply rooted in the social and cultural fabric of North-East India, where some tribal societies like the Khasi and Garo are traditionally matrilineal. They have resorted to several dimensional role-like powerful agents of change, spearheading protest, engaging in conflict resolution and mobilizing communities to seek peace and social and political justice. This manifestation of women in several shades in ethno-

political issues offers a viable platform to assert agency, although it remains largely away from claiming automatic gender equality and political empowerment.

The research emphasizes to analyze the role of women in ethno-political conflicts within the North-East India region and parallelly examine the dynamics of power-sharing involving women. The paper has been divided in two broad sections. The initial section concentrates on the role of women in ethno-political conflicts in north-east India, with a particular emphasis on their contributions to peace-building efforts and conflict dynamics. The succeeding section attempts to comprehend women's place in the region's broader political context with a focus on representation in Lok Sabha elections for three successive terms i.e. 2014, 2019, 2024.

Despite the prevalent norms and perception that women in North-East India enjoys relatively higher status in compare to other parts of India, the participation of women in governance remains limited. Therefore, this research seeks to understand the potential disparities between the high levels of female involvement in ethno-political conflicts, where women unveil multiple roles as defender, peace-builder, conflict-resolution, and their relatively minimal influence in politics.

2. Role of Women in Ethno-Political Conflict

Ethnicity in North-East India is generally seen and inextricably linked with the larger contours of primordialism, which deeply comprehend descent, race, kinship, territory, language and history.

As Smith (1999) has defined, ethnicity involves “a sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths or origin and shared memories, associated with a historic homeland. Multi-ethnicity occurs when members of a variety of ethnic groups interact within a particular forum. North-East India is home to several multi-ethnic communities, where multiple ethnic groups exist simultaneously and interact at many levels and often these diverse regional characteristics lead to ethnic clashes and conflict over many reasons such as autonomy related issues, identity politics, separatism and share in the resources.

The conflict in the region is generally ethno-political which is deep-rooted in identity, cultures, traditions etc. The ethnic groups take immense pride in their identity, traditions and culture that they often resort to resistance and violent movements to protect their community identity and rights. This has led to a consistent conflict affecting every member of the society, particularly women, bearing huge brunt of violence and instability.

In the region, women have played a leading role in numerous resistance movements, ethnic strife, and post-war reconstruction. Their involvement and role in a number of resistance movements and peacebuilding have proven to be noteworthy. The Meira Paibis movement in Manipur is among the most notable instances of women's resistance movements in north-east India's history. Manipur based Meira Paibis are a well-known group of female activists who are sometimes referred to as “torchbearers” or “women torchbearers.” Meira Paibis is a grassroots campaign started by local woman in the Imphal Valley in the early 1980s, especially among the meiti ethnic group, to stop social menaces such as illegal alcohol consumption,

large number of extra judicial killings etc. The Meira Paibis is a group of women who use traditional torches to patrol the streets at night, keeping a watchful eye on their communities and deterring violence and additionally, women's organization have been crucial to peace talks between insurgent groups and governments. The Women's group have been proved significant in the context of the ethnic conflicts in the region, especially during course of tension and conflict, insurgency related violence etc. Their activism is delved into the complex socio-political fabric of the region often marked by ethnic diversity, armed conflict and the struggles for self-determination.

In recent Manipur ethnic-conflict, women can be seen very vigilant and active to protect their community members against the conflict, they have been very proactively resorting to several mechanism like forming human chains, holding torch marches on the streets of state capital and hill districts as a part of positive intervention.

"Anyone can say anything about us. They can try calling us names or portray us in whatever way they want to. The only truth is we are women and mothers who will not think twice about going in the midst of battle," Nganbi said.

The above comment by a woman signifies how a woman in the region is indulge in violent activities in order to protect their closed ones and community beyond the traditional gendered roles.

Popular women's group such as the Meira Paibis and Imas (mothers of Manipur) have resorted to non-violent protest in the past to curb illicit activities and challenge the states inhuman laws.

The Irom Sharmila chanu movement is another significant instance of women's resistance movement in north-eastern India. In the year 2000, Irom Sharmila Chanu famously known as, "Iron lady of Manipur", sat in hunger strike in staunch protest against Armed Forces (special powers) act of 1958 (AFSPA), an act which gives free hand to army to detain, arrest and use force against civilians.

Even though she broke her fast in 2016, her movement encouraged other women in the area to voice their opposition to injustice and violations of human rights. Paradoxically the lady who stood valiantly against the inhuman law had suffered a major setback when she contested assembly election, she failed to secure even 100 votes in 2017 Manipur assembly election.

Women in North-East India have exhibited remarkable drive and talent in the peace talks of the conflict-ridden societies, much like many other women around the world. In North East India, there are a lot of women's organization that promote harmony and conflict resolution.

The Naga Mothers Association is a civil society organization in Nagaland pre-dominantly composed of woman-the women are often designated as mothers due to their caring and protective roles in the community. The association was established in February 1984, since its establishment, the Naga Mothers Association has been at the frontline of social activism, often

seen playing a critical role in advocating to solve the wide range of issues including drug addiction, alcohol abuse and human right violence. However, one of its vital contributions has been its involvement in conflict resolution and peace initiative, particularly during times of ethnic-conflict and political violence in Nagaland.

The working principle and philosophy of the association is rooted on the underlying belief that women especially mothers have an inherent responsibility in protecting their communities and to advocate greater peace and stability. The association is committed to create a room for dialogue, promoting ideals of non-violence and mediating between conflicting parties basically among insurgent groups, Indian government and civil society. The Naga Mothers Association has been a major player in resistance efforts in Nagaland. Apart from their role in resistance movement, they have been proactively involved in peace-building and conflict resolution process.

The association's commitment to peace can be known by the fact that, the association had mediated peace negotiations, i.e. 1997 ceasefire between the government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak Muviah, therefore making it the only women's group in South Asia to participate in a cessation negotiation.

Moreover, to mention few more, the Naga Women's union of Manipur has also marked its presence in peace-making process, it has collaborated with the NMA in mobilizing public awareness and reconstructing peace programme in the region. Women's organization of this kind have played pivotal roles in promoting peace by mediation, dialogue, talks and understanding between conflicting parties, often acting as mediator to de-escalate tensions and build trust and co-operation.

Women have always been at the forefront tackling societal issues, against unlawful activities like drug menace. Women electorates are not only more than 50% in the voters list of several north-eastern states, they are in the forefront in both domestic affairs and in the societal sphere- social activist and writer Nandita Datta said.

In conflict ridden communities, women in North-East India have long been seen as powerful agents of peace and change. In most cases, they have also been unwilling victims of the very conflict they often seek to resolve. Additionally, women have joined or been part of an insurgent groups and actively participated in armed conflict.

However, contrary to the situation, their roles have often been restricted to support services, with least involvement in decision-making or post-conflict negotiation. In reality, women's participation in ethno-political conflicts in North-East India is complex and multifaceted. Women have been active participants in resistance movements, peace negotiations and conflict resolution process on the one hand and on the other hand, they have to face numerous challenges which are very significant challenges in making mark in recognition, identity and distribution of power in formal political spaces.

Hence, women in north-east society in India play a sophisticated and crucial role, often influenced by a distinctive combination of traditional values, cultural diversity and evolving socio-economic dynamics. Therefore, the north-east India reveals a unique characteristic regarding gender roles and the status of women, shaped by its matrilineal system, tribal governance and more equitable gender relations. Women's role in the society of North-East India has also been vibrant. Their role and participation of women in societal and civil sphere of life is very impressive.

3. North-East Woman in political power sharing dynamics

"Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception." - Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Former Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court:

India is known for its vibrant political discourse and its strong commitment towards democracy. For democracy to be truly functionable and truly representative of voice of the people, it requires equal participation from both men and women. Gender equality in politics and is one of the essential features of modern democratic governments. Political participation however simply doesn't mean the mechanism of only casting votes but it also includes the spirit of contestation as a candidate in election, holding membership of party, important position in party structure, participation in decision making and policy making, and even holding important portfolios in government. Standing in 21st century, where woman has proved themselves in every sphere of life, representation of woman in decision making bodies is still inadequate. The constitution of India ensure gender equality through articles enumerated in constitution such as Article-14 (equality before law), Article-15 (3) (which empowers state to make special provision for women and children, Article-243 (D) (reservation of seats for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and women in Panchayats) and Article-243 T (office of chairpersons in the Municipalities reserve for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Women) etc.

In spite of all these provisions, Woman who are the other half of the population, is still away from direct stake in governmental institutions and policy making. According to the recent Inter-Parliamentary Union Report of 2024 the percentage of women member is near about 13.7 % in Lok Sabha which is around 74 seats only; on the other hand, the number of seats attained by male candidate is around 468. However, to address the situation, the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, has been introduced, mandating the reservation of 33 percent of seats for women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies and Delhi legislative assembly however it is still to be implemented. Instead of all these safeguard measures, the storyline hasn't changed drastically. Women constitute 48.5% of the total population of the country which is nearly half of the population- (Census, 2011).

In such a scenario, woman's representational aspect in power sharing is not satisfactory. According to the reports of Election commission of India in 2014 only 670-woman candidates contested for the Lok Sabha election among of which 62 were elected constituting only 11.4% of the total strength of the House. The picture didn't improve neither in 2019 nor in 2024. In 2019 Lok Sabha election, only 78 out of 726 women candidates could claim victory. In 2024 a

total of 797 women candidates contested the election, out of which 75 were elected resulting the down fall of the total womanseat percentage inLok Sabha from the previous term.

Now, in the case of north eastern region which consist of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, the representation of woman from this region is even worse than rest of India. The region has witnessed several ethnic uprisings following the complexities of autonomy related movements, integration process and the share in the natural resources. Needless to say, with the kind of societal structure prevailing in this region, women's participation has been a major factor in ethnic movements in past and even in present. However, despite increased societal and economic vocalness among women, the reality remains that they do not fully enjoy political power. According to Aristotle, political power is essential because it enables the realization of the highest human good, so, until and unless if woman themselves doesn't take the charge, then their story be always written by the claws of patriarchy.

4. Why Lok Sabha seats are important for northeastern woman?

Historically it has been seen that the region of northeast has always been neglected and had been detach from the mainstream development as well as politics. The situation becomes even more challenging when it comes to issues concerning women. Women are substantially under represented section of population in every sphere of life. From philosophy to politics, it has been noticed that woman's story is often been pointed out, written and shaped by man. This moreover results in cropping up of following issues -

Representational biasness- When women's voices are conveyed to the table through men, there is a significant risk that their needs and demands may be influenced by male perspectives, potentially leading to bias. This raises concerns about the impartiality and accuracy of representing women's issues in the policy making room (i.e. in Lok Sabha).

Lacking in real experience- A woman is uniquely positioned to accurately describe the realities faced by women in society. Therefore, policies aimed at addressing women's issues are best guided by women only, as their insights are informed by their lived experiences. So, if there is lack in proper representation of woman in Lok Sabha from northeastern states, the policies which are made by the greater good may contain insufficient measures to address the actual problems faced by a woman in the region.

Gender inequality - proper representation of woman irrespective of any particular state, in the parliament not only impacts the standard of gender equality as a whole but also impacts quality of government, governance and governmentality.

5. Lok Sabha election data of 2024, 2019, and 2014

	State	CONSTITUENCY	year	Candidate's name	Win/lost
1	Sikkim	ONE CONSTITUENCY	2024	Beena Rai	Lost
			2019	SUNNAYA GURUNG	LOST
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
2	INNER MANIPUR	TWO CONSTITUENCY- INNER AND OUTER MANIPUR	2024	INDIRA OINAM	LOST
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2014	KIM GANGTE	LOST
3		ONE CONSTITUENCY	2024	RITA MALSWAMI	LOST
			2019	LA; THLAMAUNI	LOST
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
4			2024	NO WOMAN	-

				CANDIDATE	
			2019	PRATIMA BHOUMIK	WINS THE ELECTION
			2014	JOGANATI DATTA	LOST
			2024	1.KRITI DEVI DEBBARMAN	WINS THE ELECTION
				2. ARCHANA URANG	LOST
			2019	DIPTI HALAM	LOST
				MAHARAJ KUMARI PRAGYA DEBBARMAN	LOST
			2014	MISS PATAL KANYA JAMATIA	LOST
				SUBARNAMALA DEB BARMAN	LOST
5			2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	--
6			2024	AGATHA K. SANGMA	LOST
				DR. MAZEL AMPAREEN LYNGDOH	LOST

	WEST TRIPURA	TURA CONSTITUENCY	2019	AGATHA K. SANGMA	WINS THE ELECTION
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
		SHILLONG	2024	DR. MAZEL AMPAREEN LYNGDOH	LOST
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
7		EAST TRIPURA	14 CONSTITUENCY- 1. KARIMGANJ	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE
	2019			NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
	2014			NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
		2. AUTONOMUS DISTRICT	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-

			2014	PRATIMA ENGHEEPL	LOST
		3. DHUBRI	2024	RADHA RANI BISWAS	LOST
			2019	ANAMIKA SARKAR	LOST
			2014	ZESMINA KHATUN	LOST
		4. KOKRAJHAR	2024	BINITA DEKA	LOST
				TRIPTINA RAVA	LOST
			2019	PRAMILA RANI BRAHMA	LOST
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
		5.BARPETA	2024	CHITRALEKA DAS	LOST
			2019	CHITRALEKA DAS	LOST

	NAGALAND			SANJANA PARBIN	LOST
			2014	KHURSHIDA ANOWARA BEGUM	LOST
		6.SILCHAR	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	SMT.SUSMITS DEVI	LOST
			2019	SUSMITS DEV	WINS THE ELECTION
	MEGHALAYA	7.GUWAHATI	2024	MEERA BORTHAKUR GOSWAMI	LOST
			2019	QUEEN OJA	LOST
				BOBEETA SARMA	LOST
				JUNMONI DEVI KHAUND	LOST
				MAMUNI SARMA	LOST

				RUBY NEOG	LOST
			2014	SMT. BIJOYA CHAKRABORTY	WINS THE ELECTION
		8.LAKHIMPUR	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			20214	HIRAMONI DEKA SONAWAL	LOST
		9.DIBRUGARH	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
		10. JORHAT	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NANDITA NAG	LOST
	ASSAM				

				RIBULAYA GOGOI	LOST
			2014	RIBULAYA GOGOI	LOST
		11.NAGAON	2024	SIKHA SARMA	LOST
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2014	SELIMA SULTANA	LOST
				SMT.MRIDULA BARKAKOTY	LOST
		12.KAZIRAN GA	2024	DILUWARA BEGUM CHOWDHURY	LOST
				ANIMA DEKA GUPTA	LOST
				ROSELINA TIRKEY	LOST
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDAT	

			2014		
		13. SONITPUR	2024	RINKU ROY	LOST
			2019	NO WOMAN CNDIDATE	-
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
		14.DARRAN G- UDALGURI	2024	SWARNA DEVI	LOST
			2019	SWARNAMALATA CHALINA	LOST
			2014	SWARNAMALATA CHALINA	
8	ARUNCHAL PRADESH	EAST CONSTITUE NCY	2024	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
			2019	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-

			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-
		WEST CONSTITUE NCY	2024	TOKO SHEETAL	LOST
			2019	JARJUN ETE	LOST
			2014	NO WOMAN CANDIDATE	-

The following chart shows names of female candidates contested and managed to win seats in Lok Sabha from northeastern states in the duration of 2014 to 2024. The data indicates two key observations: Firstly, there is a notably low number of female candidates contesting in Lok Sabha elections from the northeastern states between 2014 and 2024. Secondly, among the few who do contest, the success rate is very limited. Over the three Lok Sabha election terms of 2014, 2019, and 2024, only five female candidates have managed to win seats across the entire northeastern region (that is only five women in 15 years).

This situation however, in Northeast India can be resulted from a variety of factors.

Firstly, the region often experiences political instability and insecurity, which discourages women from participating directly in political activities and affairs. In certain areas, political vulnerability and security concerns are significant enough, deterring women's involvement in public and political life.

Secondly, while some parts of the region have matriarchal society set-up but the underlying patriarchal structure continues to exert considerable influence. Although the Northeast Indian societies are culturally women-centric, but in practice, patriarchal norms often prevail over matriarchal values.

Thirdly, it is a well-established fact that the Northeast region lags behind in terms of socio-economic development, and this disparity becomes even more visible when it is viewed through the prism of gender equity. As a consequence, the region has yet to go through sufficient progress to fully accept the idea that women can lead in political affairs and are capable in holding significant roles in politics.

In today's world, women have consistently proven themselves equally compatible in wide range of domains. Their capabilities are no longer constricted in traditional roles only, such as cooking and managing households but also, they have proven their effectiveness in handling high-level administrative functions and leadership positions. This, calls for a societal shift towards recognition and validation of women's potential in all sphere of life. Therefore, in order to imbibe this transformation, it is essential that governmental policies are more inclusive and gender neutral. A significant and pathbreaking endeavor towards realizing this novel goal is the enactment of a bill called Women's reservation Bill, 2023 also known as Nari shakti Vandan Adhiniyam- the bill ensures reservation of one-third of all seats for women in Lok Sabha, State legislative assemblies and Delhi legislative assembly- therefore this act would lead to more representation of women who constitutes half of the population.

Additionally, it is imperative that when a woman attains political power, they exercise that particular power independently and effectively. Government should ensure that women in authority are not undermined or overshadowed by external influences, thereby ensuring that the control as well as the execution of power rest solely with them.

6. Conclusion

Women in North-Eastern region of India acquires a considerable position in civil and societal sphere. They have been able to exert their voice through several social platforms and civil society organization, mention can be made of popular women's group in Nagaland i.e. Naga Mothers Association (NMA), Manipur based Meira Paibis and several other women's organization in the region. Their role in societal and civil sphere encompassing active participation as resistance effort, peace-building have proved significant beyond customary gendered role in other parts of India. However, since the region is secluded from mainland and the fact that it carries unique cultural diversity, the scope of smooth hassle-free development has not been possible, the scope of women in active politics representing at national parliament is abysmally low, the Lok Sabha election data spanning across three terms 2014, 2019, 2024 reflect the picture of women's representation in national legislature. Moreover, with the development of time, the women's association and civil society organization in the region should come forward and press for relentless demand to induct as many capable and potential women possible to make the representation from the region truly a manifestation of gender equality.

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