

Conclusion

This work has undertaken the task of understanding the gender perspective of ethnic/identity movements and politics from the standpoint of the women's organisations formed within the movements. In the backdrop of the larger framework of the tussle between individual and group rights within liberal democracies, the ethnic based identity movements and women's organisations have been studied by investigating the issues of women's participation in the movements and their political representation within the structures created aftermath of the movements. More than having a general understanding of the issue of political representation, it has been understood through the approach of the women's organisations. The engagement with the women's organisations aimed at understanding women's identity through the larger identity of the community or groups of their location and the controlled patriarchal environment they operate. This work claims to have offered, to a certain extent, an alternative understanding of the ethnic based identity movements and politics not from the dominant perspective, but from the perspective of the women, which otherwise has been a neglected area of research. The context of the study has been the identity movements in Assam and the women's organisations formed within these movements. All the major chapters of the study have been largely concentrated around these issues.

The first chapter titled "*Exploring the Theoretical Framework*" attempted at developing a larger theoretical framework within which the issues that have been taken up for investigation were foregrounded. Due to the multiple issues addressed by the work in relation to a particular context, the engagement with a particular theory would not have been a very fruitful approach to undertake the same. The chapter has opened up the debate between individual and group rights which has been regarded as one of the prime challenges confronting the liberal democratic states of the west. The same kind of challenge confronting the Indian state despite the attempt to strike a balance between individual and group rights through the Indian Constitution has also been highlighted in the chapter. The essentiality of understanding women's position in any society through their relation to the multiple group identities and use of such identities to pursue other

interests has been focused in developing the theoretical framework of the study. The chapter therefore engages itself in understanding the ethnic based group identities with a conceptual understanding of ‘ethnicity’ and its application in the particular context of the study. At the same time as the issue of political representation has been evoked, this chapter also undertakes the theoretical concerns relating to the concept of representation. Therefore, the broader theoretical framework that has been taken up includes the debates of individual and group rights, ethnicity as a marker of group identity and a tool to pursue group rights and the concept of political representation for women located within the construction of such group identity.

The second chapter “*Myth and Reality of Gender Equality in the Societies of Northeastern Region of India*” introduces the context of the study in a detailed manner by emphasizing on the women and community relationship in the societies of Northeastern region of India. This chapter has explored how women’s identity is constructed and deconstructed through the communities they are located in and therefore status and position of women vary according to the organizing principles of the communities and societies. The chapter has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the myths and realities of gender equality in the societies of Northeastern region to display the discrepancy in the representation of women in these societies. The eulogization of gender equality in these societies is a myth veiled under the deep rooted patriarchal practices, which may differ from the standard norms of defining patriarchal practices in relation to other parts of the country. The chapter further explores the role of women in the defense of their communities and such act of defense has been focused through the active role played by women in various movements. Starting with the nationalist movement the role of women has been located in the identity movement of the region, especially in Assam. It reflects how women have been allocated a specific role within the movements that is not sharply different from the already existing gender roles. The drawing and participation of women are clubbed with the purpose of creating a mass base for the movements, which may or may not create a space for mobilization of women’s question.

The third chapter “***Movements, Organisations and Locations of Women: The case of Assam***” concerns itself with the case study analysis of the work. It has been mentioned earlier that the multiple issues the study is addressing is channelized through certain women’s organisations located within the space of ethnic based identity movements in Assam. The chapter in its first section explores the history of women’s organisations in India and then proceeded for presenting such history in the context of Assam. This particular chapter introduces the case studies of the work by putting the three women’s organisation namely Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS), Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad (AJMP) and All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in their historical contexts. The revisiting of the historical context has been undertaken in order to situate the women’s organisations in relation to a particular movement. Along with the contextualization of women’s organisations within the space of ethnic movements, the study has explored the women’s questions through the activities of the women’s organisations to create a space for itself in the larger movements for community rights. The space of the women’s organisations has been identified as the one where women’s activities are concentrated in socio-economic and political advancement of women, despite having a larger agenda of the ethnic movement they are attached with. The second part of the chapter was mainly concentrated in analyzing the collected data through interview schedule from the women leaders and members of the organisations in order to investigate the areas where these organisations are making impact in raising women’s question. Through the individual and comparative analysis of the women’s organisations it has been noticed that women’s organisations have been successful to certain extent to create a space for articulation of women’s issues within the lager space of the identity movements. But the maintenance of such space aftermath of the movement has become an issue of concern where a major variation has been witnessed in the individual cases.

The fourth chapter “***Understanding Participation and Political Representation: the Women’s Question in Assam***” takes forward the analysis of the third chapter with specific concentration on the question of political representation for women. The activities of the women’s organisations in the socio-economic sphere which have been

analyzed in the third chapter have now been enlarged to the political sphere to undertake the investigation about the approach of the women's organisations towards the question of political equality for women. The rationale behind putting the women's organisations within the larger question of women's political equality lies in the fact that these organisations have created a certain space for their activities within the space of identity movements, which has been consolidated through their socio-economic activities to provide larger visibility to women in the public sphere, but while dealing with the question of women's representation, the restricted space of their activity is clearly visible. Apart from the ABWWF, the other two organisations suffer from a serious sense of withdrawal from the political question, though ABWWF also is not in a position to claim their substantial success in addressing the question of women's representation despite their engagement with the same. What explains such kind of situation has largely been taken up by this particular chapter in its analysis. The analysis of each organisation separately and the comparative analysis has opened up certain areas of great concern where women's entry into politics has been largely related to the traditional gender role of women and there are various instances of women's organisations preferring community rights over women's equality. The larger question is not only the visibility or presence of women in the decision making bodies but also how the existing gender relations are deeply rooted and at times endorsed by the women's organisations. The question of political equality has been conveniently ignored within the movement and also in the structures of political power created aftermath of the movement as a response to the demands of enlarging the ambit of group rights. Therefore, whatever efforts have gone into addressing the issue of women's political representation has hardly any impact on the existing gender relations. The chapter also concerns itself with understanding the viewpoints of the beneficiaries of the organisations or the common members of the organisations. The emphasis of the work has been understanding the narratives and experiences of the leaders of the women's organisations related to their two fold participation in the movements, firstly as member of the community involved in the question of group rights and secondly as the leaders of the women's organisations with an agenda of articulating women's question. These organisations were put both in the

historical context of their formation and also their activities in the present context. The section on the responses of the beneficiaries and common members of the organisation has been focused on to understand the areas that women's organisations have successfully intervened and left impact on as part of their effort to articulate women's questions.

Drawing from the major chapters on historical and quantitative analysis the fifth chapter "***Contradiction between Group Identity and Women's Question in Assam***" includes the larger question of contradictions that have come up while trying to understand the ethnic movement and women's question in the context of Assam. This chapter focuses on the multiple layers involved in understanding such contradictions. There also exists sites of convergence between ethnic identity and women's question, but it has largely been a site, which is entangled within the conflicts of individual and group rights. The attempt to establish a link between women's participation in ethnic based identity movements and the issue of women's political representation through the women's organisation has opened up the multiple issues to be addressed in order to undertake this kind of a study. The study has largely come up with the fact that participation hardly comes with guarantee of ensuring representation to women. Women's participation is also conditioned by a particular framework mediated by the norms of the communities.

Participation has been inflicted in the bodies of women in different ways. The cultural codes become stricter on women as they are used as the marker of the distinctiveness of the community. On the other hands their bodies also become site of violence. At the same time the non-translation of participation into women's representation reveals the uncomfortable relation between ethnic politics and women's representation. Ethnic groups that demands equality with other groups, take a very hostile stand while coming to the question of women's equality, which is indicative of the lack of internal equality within the composition of communities that more or less functions through established gender relations. However, there is no denial of the participatory space gained by the women through women's organisations which not only paved the way for mobilization of

women in the public sphere and articulation of women's question. The constant denial of decision making power to women not only questions the efforts of the women's organisations but also the myth of better status and position of women in this part of the country. The patriarchal set up the societies have very strategically made a space for women to play their public role as mothers, daughters and sisters, for making peace within conflicting communities, and their role has been used by the male leadership for gaining more ground in the ethnic politics.

The alternative understanding of identity politics from a gender perspective underlines the fact that in the evolution of politics/ethnic politics in this region, especially in the state of Assam, gender relations play vital role, though it has been totally unacknowledged. The importance of gender relations in shaping political power of the region has been subdued under the glorification of socio-economic mobility and role of peacemaking of the women of this region. At the same time inadequate attention has been paid to the fact that the civic space of women's visibility is the space which has been taken as an extension of the domestic sphere, and in no way threatens patriarchal power of the community and the state, not to talk about the family. Even for that matter, women's organisations are also regarded as civil society organisations which do not have any political significance. The economic mobility of women and their greater visibility in the public has been used as indicators to define gender equality and egalitarian nature of these societies, which were again accused of being transformed into patriarchal one by the entry of the modern institutions. However, there is lack of substantial evidence to argue that these societies were free from gender discrimination. The traditional institutions, customary laws bear evidences of gender based inequalities in these societies. The women's organisations are located within that space where revision of gender role is a very difficult task, because despite patriarchy is inherent in communities and State institutions the myth of equality has been quite strong. This research work does not claim to have touched every aspect of understanding gender perspective of ethnic movements in Assam and is not free from its own limitations. But it has opened up certain crucial issues and questions which may become subject of further research.

Notes

ⁱ The concept of internal restrictions has been used by Kymlicka in order to respond to the critiques of group rights. Internal restrictions indicate the means of control within a community in the context of group rights.

ⁱⁱ The principle of ‘benign neglect’ has been used to mean a stronger notion than state neutrality towards various ethno-religious diversity. See Kymlicka, 2002: 343-44 for further explanation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Provisions of group rights in Indian Constitution are enumerated in Articles 25-28 and Article s29 and 30. For further explanation see Basu, 2011: 119-123

^{iv} Liberal notion of individualism has been based on an abstract notion which indicates the liberty, equality and rationality of individuals who are stripped of any ascribed or hierarchical identity.

^v The identity movements in this context have been referred to the movements for demand of various group rights in the Northeastern region of India and Assam primarily on the basis of ethnicity. It has been discussed in the subsequent chapters in details

^{vi} Identity politics has been referred to as utilization of ethnicity as a tool to pursue group interest and gain access to political power.

^{vii} For further explanation see Phillips, 1991

^{viii} The feminist movement developed in the west in the initial period faced criticisms for trying to present women as a homogenous category. The discrimination faced by women depends on the context of the societies. Though certain discriminations are commonly encountered by women of all societies, but experience and practice of patriarchy varies from society to society.

^{ix} There is no unanimity amongst scholars regarding definition of ‘Nation’. The different definition of Nation is discussed in the writings of Anthony. D Smith (1987), Benedict Anderson (1983). For further explanation refer to the section on gender and nation in the chapter 1 of this work.

^x In this context the usage of the term has been in relation to how each community has a specific role and space assigned to women. Women are supposed to behave and conduct their lives according to the norms of the society and conform to its notion of “ideal women” often related to women’s role in the private sphere and reproduction of cultural identity of the community.

^{xi} The reformer saint who brought liberal brand of Vaishnavism in the Brahmaputra valley

^{xii} The process of formation of identity has been complex. In this context this identity has largely been seen as the part of consolidation of Assamese nationalism through linguistic nationalism led by the educated middle class of the Brahmaputra valley

^{xiii} Bodo women represent the women of the largest plain tribe in Assam

^{xiv} A famous literature of Assam, who has depicted the picture rural Assam and its women in various short stories

^{xv} This Novel is a depiction of the life of a young upper caste widow who has been secluded in the society.

^{xvi} Established by the Ahom rulers in Assam who came crossing the Paktai range to Assam and belonged to the Thai Shan Tribe

^{xvii} The text taken from the newspaper has been translated by the author.

^{xviii} Pushpalata Das, Swadhinata Andolanat Axomor Mohilar Bhumika, published in Satxori Magazine of 1987, 23-27 has explanation of Gandhi's visit to Tezpur, Assam.

^{xix} This work of Sakiani can be regarded as one of the historic document on women's movement in Assam and the portion which has been referred in the study has been translated by the author

^{xx} The objectives of the Constitution of APMS have been translated by the author.