

**A STUDY ON RIGHTS OF RURAL WOMEN TO LIVE WITH DIGNITY IN THE
CONTEXT OF ARTICLE 243 D (3) OF THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA-A
CASE STUDY OF KALIABOR BLOCK IN NAGAON DISTRICT**

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

Dignity is the birth right of every human being. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948 realized in its preamble that recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. Article 1 of the UDHR also provides that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.¹ One of the objectives of the preamble of the Constitution of India is to provide a dignified life to its people irrespective of sex, caste, race, creed, place, etc. And to fulfill those objectives so many provisions have been incorporated in the Constitution of India in the form of Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy and even at some parts the Constitution encourages to make laws discriminating in favour of the weaker sections of the society, including women.

It has been realized that women constitute half of the total population of the world. The statistics is almost same in the national level also. A country cannot develop by bypassing the half of its population. In a democracy, people take active participation in the governance of the country. It makes them more responsible towards themselves and towards the nation. The active participation of popular masses is expected as well as desirable. It is also evident that worldwide women are dominated by men. In India also, the position of women is not satisfactory. But real democracy could not be enjoyed until and unless all the people of a country take part in that process. To become a part of the democracy, the women must take active part in the decision making process. So,

¹ www.un.org, retrieved on 16/3/19, at 12:31pm

political participation of the women is very much important for the development of a country.

In India, equal rights are given to both men and women in case of voting. In 1950, universal suffrage granted voting rights to all women. This is enshrined in Article 326 of the Constitution of India. The Constitution of India incorporated various provisions for empowerment of women. But it has been seen that the participation of women in politics in India is still very poor. To increase the participation of women in decision making process in India, various efforts have been made by the government which seems to be ineffective. Therefore, there is a huge demand for reservation of seats for women in the Parliament, State Legislature and as well as in the local government. The Women's Reservation Bill or the Constitution(108th Amendment) Bill, 2008, is a lapsed bill in the Parliament of India which proposed to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lok Sabha, and in all State Legislative Assemblies for women.² However, by the introduction of the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 seats for women are reserved in the Panchayati Raj System. One-third seats are reserved for women in the local self-government. In most of the states now it has been raised to 50%.

The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not confined only to casting vote but also to participate in decision making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Political participation of women helps the women in their holistic development. It provides them the scope for overall development of their personality. In one of the landmark judgment of the Delhi High Court, it has observed that the Constitutional protection of dignity required us to acknowledge the value and worth of all individuals as members of our society. Dignity recognizes a

² www.pib.nic.in retrieved on 16/3/19, at 1:45 pm

person as a free being who develops his or her body and mind as he or she deems it fit. At the root of the dignity is the autonomy of the private will, and a person's freedom of choice and of action. Human dignity rest on recognition of the physical and spiritual integrity of the human being, his or her humanity, and his or her value as a person, irrespective of the utility he can provide to others.

Women should get the environment whether it is inside her home or in the society, where she can exercise the autonomy of her will and her freedom of choice and action. It is believed that political participation of women can create that environment and provide a dignified life to the women. Reservation of seats in the Panchayati Raj Institutions is considered as a strong and bold step by the government towards empowerment of women in India.

Here, the researcher has made a study regarding empowerment of women with the help of political participation and considered it as a strong instrument to assert their right to live with dignity. The study presents a micro level observation of emerging women leadership due to reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj System in Assam and its various districts.

The present study is divided under seven headings. Each of the heading is termed as a Chapter to analyze the concept of dignity of women through reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj System. The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 has given the opportunity to the women for the first time to enter into grass roots politics and now the provision of 50 per cent reservation in the PRIs has been a significant step for the women towards not only their political empowerment but also their social equality. The study was carried out in a district of Assam named Nagaon district. Out of

18 blocks from undivided Nagaon district only one block has been selected. Kaliabor block has been selected for the field study of the aforementioned issues.

The **first chapter** of the present study deals with the introduction to the main chapters which includes, scope and ambit of the study, objective of the study, significance of the study, review of literature, framing of research questions, about the methodology adopted by researcher to carry out her study, and finally the logical ordering of the scheduled chapters. While reviewing the literature it was found by the researcher that there were only few studies related to political participation (reservation for women) of women for a dignified life in India and specifically in Assam and the impact of implementation of 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 in Assam in attaining dignity by women. For this reason a scheme is prepared by the researcher to carry out her study. She had set two research questions to examine the issues. Comprehensive questions were structured to seek the information from the respondents in Kaliabor block of Nagaon district in Assam. She has also adopted interview method and applied sampling method to collect the data, and the data were collected randomly.

In the **second chapter**, the researcher dealt with the conceptual frame work of the term, the definition of the key concepts and also the historical background of the development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India as well as in Assam. Panchayati Raj System is not new in India; it was always there in early ages of civilization. However, modern concept of PRIs in India was introduced by the British Government. The main object of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is the participation of maximum numbers of people in the democracy and the most significant feature is the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayat elections. India is the country of villages where almost 80 per cent of its population lives; therefore, their participation in decision making process makes a big difference in the development of

the country. Reservation of seats for women in Panchayats opens the door for the rural women to participate in the grassroots democracy which brought a revolutionary change in their lives.

The state of Assam also bears a history regarding Panchayati Raj System. Since the British ruled government, Assam is one of the most significant states to enact laws to promote local self-government in India. But the Panchayat institutions under the British proved to be a failure as no significant role was played by the local self-government during the British regime in Assam. After Independence also Assam was one of the pioneering states to introduce Panchayati Raj when it enacted the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1948. With the introduction of various committees to enquire the present status of Panchayati Raj Institutions in contemporary India and to modify it with the recommendations of those committees, Assam has also followed up those directions of the central government. Assam has enacted a few pieces of legislations to make local self-government workable. But till the enactment of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 the PRIs in Assam was not successful.

The perspective of the PRIs in the states of India were substantially changed by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which came into force with effect from 24th April, 1993. This amendment of the Constitution sought to give some uniformity to Panchayati Raj Institutions throughout India by providing guidelines and directives. Following this development, Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was passed with features in conformity with the new provisions of the Indian Constitution with regard to Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The patriarchal situation in Panchayats was seen in which there was constant interference by village elites, party bosses and state-level politicians affording little

space to an elected woman to articulate her demands or share in decision-making processes. The elected woman continued to be subjected to the dichotomies of her twin roles. In one hand her ostensible power and authority in the Panchayat and on the other hand her relative powerlessness within her home. It was remarkable that despite of all these odds, a number of women had become increasingly skilled, articulate and potentially conscious of their self-worth and strength.

For the successful implementation of the 73rd Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1992, provisions for delegated legislation are made. Three tier systems have been adopted for proper functioning of the system. Gaon Sabha, Zilla Parishad and District Planning Committee have been introduced by this Act. Adequate provisions for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women have also been made. Further, the Act introduced provisions for the establishment and constitution of Finance Commission and State Election Commission. The most significant contribution of this act is the provision of reservation of seats for women in election to Panchayats. It has been provided in Article 243D of the Constitution of India. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 added a new Part IX consisting of 16 Articles and the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. The State of Assam has reserved 50% seats in the Panchayat elections from 2013. The Assam Assembly has also passed a bill which has barred persons with more than two children from contesting Panchayat elections and also determined minimum educational qualification to be eligible for being members and chief of different levels of Panchayati Raj bodies in the State.

The **third chapter** of this study is related to the development of the concept of dignity in the world. The historical development of the concept of dignity, discussion about the various international documents that are responsible for the emancipation and enhancing the dignity of women through political participation, where the researcher

has discussed about the contribution of universal declaration of human rights, the commission on the status of women, the role played by the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, the significance of the first world conferences on women in Mexico, followed by second, third and fourth world conference on women. Here, the researcher has also discussed about the Conventions on the political rights of women, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, United Nations Millennium Declaration. The researcher has also included the documents specifically written for the empowerment of rural women. Also, an effort has been made by the researcher to discuss about various provisions and reservations in politics for rural women in the SAARC Countries.

It is clear from the study of various international documents that discrimination against women is a worldwide phenomenon. The womenfolk of all over the world are suffering since time immemorial. Struggle for rights for women is not new. A clear shift of the concept of dignity is evident from various writings of the great writers of the world from different times. The journey of the concept of dignity from classical Roman laws as status to holding a position in public office, social role which evokes respect, applied to institution and the State itself, crown and royal dignity, status of sovereign states, relationship between God and Man, idea of distinguishing man from other creatures, is the ability to choose to be what he wants to be, man as having the capacity of reason, treatment of individual as the ends, it is associated with the idea of dignity as autonomy. But the concept of dignity has been shifted to political philosophy; it is the appropriate state of women and men in her preferred political system, some time it is compared with that of the economic capacity and contribution, some time it is referred to equality and fraternity.

Gradually it has started to enter in the international documents and slowly it has entered in the Constitutional documents of the various countries of the world. The present status of the concept of dignity developed only after the Second World War. It is also found that exploitation, discrimination, inequality and deprivation of women was going on all over the world, therefore, various international conventions took place to discuss about the present status of women. It was found that empowerment of women is not possible without the active participation of women in the decision making process. It was found from the study that political participation and holding any political leadership position of women is very less across the world. The active and real participation is not possible without self interest of the women. Various provisions have been made by various international documents for emancipation and enhancing the position of women in the society.

Here, the researcher has discussed about the reservation policies for rural women in various SAARC countries. The reason for choosing the SAARC countries is that most of them were under the British Rule. Therefore, their socio-economic and political status has many similarities. In most of the SAARC countries, there are provisions for reservation of seats in the local self government except few countries like The Maldives. In compliance with the resolution taken by the International convention most of the Countries reserved seats for women in politics for their empowerment. In India also in view of bringing improvement in the socio-economic and political conditions of women the central and state government has also introduced different legislations, programmes and schemes for the empowerment of women.

In the **fourth chapter** of this study, various Constitutional provisions including special provisions for women have been discussed. During the study it has been realized that the Constitution of India is one of the finest Constitution in the world. The basic

principles of our Constitution are justice, equality, faith, dignity and fraternity. Various provisions have been incorporated based on these principles. Equality is the main principle, in the absence of which all other things are impossible to achieve. In one hand it is specifically mentioned that there should not be any discrimination on the basis of gender on the other hand it has encouraged the positive discrimination in favour of weaker section of the society which include women too. Article 14 promises equality before the law and equal protection by the laws and Article 15(1) specifically prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex. On the contrary Article 15(3) permits the State to positively discriminate in favor of women to make special provisions to ameliorate their social conditions and provide political, economic and social justice.

The researcher also realized in her study that the government of India has made every effort to enact legislations for fulfilling the goal that has been set in the Preamble of the Constitution of India. Various women centric legislations were enacted since independence and the Constitution of India has been amended to insert provisions for the reservation of seats for empowerment of women. It is found in her study that in order to increase the participation of women in the decision making process, Part IX and Eleventh Schedule has been inserted in the Constitution of India by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. This step can be referred as historic because it has opened a new horizon for the rural women of India. The women, who did not have the right to talk even within the four walls of their house, now can lead the villages.

In this chapter researcher has also discussed about the Five Year Plans of the Independent India. She has found that starting from the first Five Year Plan to the Twelfth Five Year Plan of the Government of India, in every plan there was mention about empowerment of women. In every Plan the concern of the government regarding enhancing the status of women were there. Even in the NITI Aayog (National Institution

for Transforming India) the same concern is reflected. It has set 15 year vision document, where the empowerment of women is one of the main vision. In collaboration with United Nations, it has started for the first time a project 'Women Transforming India', an online contest for the women of India, where the women will share their success stories and to make the other women aware about their potentialities.

In her discussion, it is found that government has taken initiatives and various departments of government have intervened for the upliftment of the status of women and to bring various provisions of the Constitution and various women centric legislations in to actions. Government has set up separate department for the purpose of looking after various women issues and their development. Few organizations have been set up under the department to carry on various developmental policies and give effect to the strategies set by the department to achieve those goals. Government has also introduced various innovative programmes for development of the status of women. It is found in this study that, government has realized that empowerment of women is not possible without their participation and active involvement. For a long time women have been dominated, suppressed and oppressed by the society. To break that cocoon, they need the support and co-operation of the government, various departments of government and also the society.

Therefore, programmes and policies are prepared to provide employment facilities to the women so that they can be independent. For the employment they must be qualified and for that reason they need the support and welfare services. The society must be sensitive towards the women and awareness must be generalized in the society for the equal and fellow feelings for the women. No programmes, policies and strategies will be successful without the awareness of the society. Participation of women in politics is very essential for the development of the country.

The **fifth chapter** deals with the role of Judiciary to safeguard the rights of rural women to live with dignity. It has been found in the study that the judicial approach towards the rights and equality as guaranteed by the Constitution of women has been changed. In various cases the Courts have successfully delivered their verdict to strengthen the position of women in the society and to provide them a life to live with dignity. The attitude of the courts towards equality is that only equal must be treated as equals and that unequal may not be treated as equals. This broad paradigm itself permits the creation of affirmative actions by way of special laws creating rights and positive discrimination by way of reservations or special provisions in favour of weaker sections of the society.

It is also observed in so many cases that the judicial approach towards the protective discrimination is in favour of the women. The Judiciary has interpreted Article 16 for the empowerment of women. Though, this Article has prohibits the State not to discriminate on the basis of sex but while doing so, courts have followed the principle of equality to equals and allowed the State to make laws in favour of women. Making laws in favour of women is not discriminatory action of the State but welfare, just and positive action towards the upliftment of women's status.

It is also observed from the study that the Apex Court has realized that each incident of sexual harassment of women at workplaces results in violation of fundamental rights of 'Gender Equality' and the 'Right to Life and Liberty.' Article 21 provides for right to life and personal liberty of each and every person in India. The judiciary has interpreted this Article so many times and given a new and wider meaning to it. The ambit of this section is expanded and now it includes right to live with human dignity, right to livelihood, right to work, right to privacy, right against sexual harassment etc. within this Article.

In recent years, the judiciary has applied the principle of harmonious construction, which implies reading Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy together. The Indian Courts have also taken an immensely expansive definition of fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution as an umbrella provision and have included within it, right to everything which would make life meaningful and which prevent it from making it a mere existence, including the right to food, clean air, water, roads, health, and importantly the right to shelter/housing.

It is seen that new emerging crimes like acid attack on women is also dealt by judiciary very responsibly. It is said by the court that it is equal to taking away her identity from her and such rampant increase in this heinous crime was leading to terror amongst women and the Supreme Court took a vital step towards the safety of women in the country. The SC has issued several directions for the protection of acid attack victims like minimum three lakhs rupees of compensation for victims, adequate publicity of victim compensation schemes, private hospitals must not refuse treatment to victims, and full treatment must include medicines, food, bedding and reconstructive surgeries.

The study reveals that so many times the SC has directed the State to make laws following the guideline provided by the Directive Principle of State policy. It is also found that the Constitutional law and ordinary law through judiciary has been working as a savior of women from atrocities and also extending helping hand in numerous ways to perk up status of women in all spheres of their life.

At the end of chapter five, the researcher has discussed about few case laws related to Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 and the stand of the courts in implementing various provisions of this Act.

The status of women in our country has risen to the present level which may not be up to the mark but still satisfactory only because of active judiciary as well as public spirited people who successfully maneuvered the status of women of our country to the present level. The unbiased and independent judiciary has always played the role of a true Guardian of justice. Since independence, many a times the judiciary has proactively interpreted and amplified the ambit of legislative provisions in favour of the unprivileged half of the society, i.e., the women of our country.

In **chapter six**, the researcher has discussed about her field study. The political participation of women can make them aware about their rights, build up their confidence and enhance their capacity to take decisions and acquire the position of leadership. Therefore, reservation of seats in the Panchayati Raj System is a historic step taken by the government. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a very significant step for the life of rural women in India. It could pull out the rural women from the kitchen to position of power.

The most significant contribution of this act is the provision of reservation of seats for women in election to Panchayats. It has been provided in Article 243D of the Constitution of India. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 added a new Part IX consisting of 16 Articles and the Eleventh Schedule to the Constitution. The state of Assam has reserved 50% seats in the Panchayat elections from 2013 election.

The researcher has selected Kaliabor block of Nagaon district in Assam as her area for the field study. Undivided Nagaon district has 18 Development Blocks. Among these 18 blocks, the researcher has chosen Kaliabor block as a sample for study. The reason for selecting Kaliabor Block of Nagaon district in view of the researcher is that the villages under Kaliabor Block reflects the image of a typical village of Assam.

Therefore, the findings of the study conducted in the villages of Kaliabor Block of Nagaon district may be equated to the findings of all the villages of Assam. Kaliabor Development Block has ten Gram Panchayats. From these 10 Gram Panchayats, 250 sample respondents have been selected randomly, 25 sample respondents from each Gram Panchayats for the convenience of the study. Thus, the researcher has tried to study the practical implementation of the reservation policies as envisaged in Article-243D (3) of the Constitution of India considering Kaliabor Block as a model.

The socio-economic and political profile of the elected women of Kaliabor block has been discussed here. The socio-economic factor of the women leaders is important for shaping the nature and level of participation of members in the political institutions. The data collected and the information received by the researcher during her study conducted between the years 2015 to 2017, in the villages of Kaliabor Block reveals so many facts about the socio-economic and political profile of the women of those areas.

Most of the women who are interested for politics are of middle aged. The area is vastly populated by the OBC category people and majority of women are house wives and daily labourers. Majority of women are married and are mother of two children. Few of them have more than two children (29.4%). The economic condition of the families are not very good, 14.8% of them have family income less than Rs. 40,000/- and most of the women live in the joint family (73.6%), the families of the respondents are holding very less land and therefore, their income is very less and have to depend on daily wages.

The area is dominated by the political parties like AGP (Assam Gana Parishad), which is followed by BJP and INC. Some women are not affiliated to any political party and few are influenced by independent candidates. The women of that area have let the

researcher know that they cast votes on the basis of political party they like. They are influenced with the manifesto and ideology of those political parties, sometimes they cast their votes to those candidates who are known to them. They have also said that they generally cast votes to those candidates whom their family members and their husbands follow. The women are interested to take part in the election campaign and they takes part in various campaigning activities like, door to door visit, going outside of their villages etc.

It was very interesting to know that 89.2% of the total respondents were not active in politics before the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. A large number of respondents have ideas about the PRIs, but only to a limited extent. The respondents are aware about the Gram Panchayats and they have some knowledge about Gram Panchayats. When they were asked about their sources of information they said that most is from their family members and the workers and the offices of the political parties. They have different ideas about the sources of income of the Gram Panchayats.

The data on women's awareness level regarding politics revealed is not up to the mark, however, change in mobility and in crossing other obstacles and the beginning of a process and direction of change in women's experience is observed. The women have confessed that their entry and work in PRIs has made a positive impact on the women representatives. More than 85% of them perceive that their status is enhanced.

While analyzing about the participation of women and number of elected women of Kaliabor block of Nagaon district, in the years 2001, 2007, and 2013, the rise in the participation of women in politics is observed. But that change is not evident in

the result of Assam Legislative Assembly elections as well as in the Lok-Sabha elections. So, it is a matter of concern.

Women have entered Panchayats from across class, caste and tribes and have shown emerging leadership and achievements despite the challenges and obstacles faced by them. There are popular myths and perceptions about women's non-participation in Panchayats but women's own responses about their attendance in meetings, their efforts to carry their viewpoints in meetings, problems brought to them by their constituents and the mode of their solutions and time devoted to Panchayat work shows that a large number of women have made a good beginning for effective participation in grassroots democracy.

7.2 Findings of the Study

By analysis of the collected data related to present study, the researcher has summed-up the findings with some major defects in Panchayati Raj System in Assam and also forwarded few recommendations on the basis of the findings to improve upon it and make it a successful instrument of empowerment of rural women and help them to live a life with dignity. The present system of Panchayats in Assam and the participation of women in Panchayati Raj System show that there are some defects in working of the Panchayat, particularly participation of women, role of Gram Sabha, to develop awareness among the rural people in local affairs, mainly the women.

It is found that control over the Panchayats by superior authorities, bureaucrats, and ruling political party, lack of confidence of the women, non-cooperation of the family members, society and offices, social stigma etc. are some of the defective features in the working of Panchayati Raj System in Assam and cause of less activeness and involvement of the women in the system. In order to verify the changes brought by

the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, in the political life of the women some questions has been asked to selected 25 women representatives and female voters of each Panchayat of Kaliabor under the study. The women representatives and women voter's respondents were selected on the basis of random sampling method from among the beneficiaries of different schemes. Interview method has also been adopted to obtain few information from those women, and to know about the various situations they are facing while exercising their power and doing their duties.

The researcher has set two research questions in the beginning of her study. Accordingly, she has conducted her field study to search the answer of her research questions. At the end of her study the findings for the two research questions will be discussed separately to make it more systematic, specific and content. It will be discussed under two headings separately below.

7.2.1 Findings of the Present Study in Relation to the First Research Question

The first research question was whether 33% reservation for women in PRIs assures the dignity of rural women in Assam or not. The findings of this research question are:-

- It is found from the study that 82.4% of the total sample respondents have participated in the last Panchayat election, which is very high.
- While the respondents were casting votes, 16.8% of them have casted vote to the educated candidates and 21.2 % of them have casted vote on the basis of the merits of the candidate.

- 64.8 % of the respondents replied that they have cast their votes according to their own choices and not influenced by any male members of the family and 35.2% were influenced by the male members of the family in casting their votes.
- It is very encouraging to find that 84.4% of the respondents participated in election campaign. Only 15.6% have not participated.
- It is found from the study that 41.7% of the respondents have participated in door to door campaigns, 26.5% of the respondents have gone outside the village for campaigning, 14.7% of them have distributed pamphlets, 11.5% of them have addressed public meetings and 5.6% of them were involved in preparing and sticking posters. It has increased the confidence levels of those women.
- While the women were asked about their awareness of the Act, 79.6% of them have replied that they know about it to some extent and 8.4% of them have knowledge to a large extent. Thus, the awareness level is increasing among the women.
- The women are found aware about the basic knowledge of politics. 50.8% of the respondents know that the voting age is 18 years, 81.2% know that elections are conducted every five years, 21.6% of the women know that 25 years is the age for contesting elections, 100% of them know about the Gram Panchayat, 42% of them knows that 50% seats are reserved for women and 30.8% of them know about the block development office. However, they are less aware about the latest amendment.
- It is also found that the sources of information about the PRIs received by the respondents are from various sources, namely, internet, social media, T.V.,

radio, from social workers, NGOs, political office workers etc. but not only from their husbands or other male members of the family.

- 85.2% of the respondents have reported that according to them the reservation policy of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has empowered the women only and only 14.8% denied it.
- 89.7% of the respondent believes that they have entered the grassroots politics.
- It is very interesting to know that 83.1% of the respondents believe that they found a platform to establish their rights, 72.3% of them reported that their awareness level have been increased. 49.8% of them believe that social status of women has been increased and 48.4% of them believe that they are living a dignified life.
- The respondents are also associated with NGOs/SHGs/Co-operative societies etc. 71.6% of them are associated with these types of organization apart from political activities. However, 28.4% of them are not associated with such activities.
- The respondents have knowledge about the sources of income of the PRIs, only 4% of them have no specific idea about the sources of income of the PRIs.
- In this study it is found that 73.2% of the respondents agreed with the view that training is necessary for the PRI members, however, 22.8% of them have given the answer negatively. But the notable change is that the attitudes of the respondents have changed. They have started to assert their rights and express their opinion freely.

- In the analysis of the results of the Gram Panchayat elections of 10 Gram Panchayats of Kaliabor block in the last four terms of Panchayat elections of Assam, it is found that in 2001, total 34% women representative were elected, where as it is increased to 38%, 49% and 55% in the year 2007, 2013 and 2018 respectively.

7.2.2 Findings of the Present Study in Relation to the Second Research Question

The second research question of the researcher is whether the representation of women in PRIs is quantitative or qualitative. After a detailed analytical study and also field study on the research topic, the findings of the researcher regarding the second research question is given below:-

- The women who have never been in politics and were not interested in politics had to enter in politics because of the reservation of seats in the Panchayat elections. During the field study, it was found that 89.2% of the sample respondent replied that they have never been in politics before 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.
- Lack of awareness among the rural women is another reason for less active participation of women in politics because 32.4% of sample respondents said that they do not have knowledge about the various rules and procedures of PRIs, 79.6% have replied that they have some knowledge to an extent and only 8.4% of them are well informed and 7.2% are totally unaware.
- Though the Constitution of India guarantees equality to its people but it is not realized in practice. Still women are considered to be subordinate to men and society is not ready to be under women leadership. Society has less confidence

- on leadership of women. 11.2% of the women reported that they don't get support from the village people.
- Women get less co-operation and support from their family members and other relatives, 15.6% of the women complained that they don't get support from the husband and other family members.
 - Big family size and having no control over birth is another issue for women, 73.6% of women have reported that they live in a joint family and 26.8% have reported that they do not get time as they have to take care of their family members. It is found that 47.7% of the respondents have two children and 29.4% of them have three and more children.
 - 22.4% of respondents reported that there is non-cooperation by the officials and bureaucrats and sometimes they are subjected to sexual harassment also.
 - Gram Sabhas are not constituted properly and do not hold its meetings regularly. Sometimes the meetings are held on paper only, 49.2% of the respondents' women have reported that they attended the Gram Sabhas sometimes only and 32% of them never attended the meetings.
 - Political parties influence is another reason for less activeness of the women, as it is seen that 30.4% of the respondents have cast vote on the influence of the political parties. 19.6% have also reported that they got information about PRIs from the political party workers and offices.
 - There is lack of sufficient staff in the Panchayat office, only 14.4% of the respondents reported that they get information from the Panchayat office about various welfare schemes of the government.

- Health issue is another reason for less active participation of women in politics. Women in India are not aware about their health and nutrition. Most of the women are anemic and suffering from mal-nutrition. So, they are very weak to carry on their duty properly.
- Menstruation is another reason of less active participation of women in politics. In India, people have very wrong conception regarding menstruation. During those days generally women are preferred to stay at home and not to touch anything.
- Vulnerability of women is another big issue for their less active participation. Socially they are not secured. For that reason they cannot work till night as a man can do.
- A woman going outside at night for work is not considered as good by our society. The women can face character assassination at any time.
- During the field study it was reported by 22.4% of the respondents that in the offices also they do not get the support of the officials. Many times even they have faced sexual harassment at their offices.
- The Panchayati Raj System has lost its self-governance character. It is more of implementing authority of the government schemes then governing by the local people.
- Elected body is not accountable to the voters in real sense of term. Elected body is not free from corruption and favouritism.
- It is also seen that the elected women members are sometime busy to satisfy their higher level political leaders than the voters.

- There is a big gap between the common people and the government officials. Only 22.4% of the respondent reported that there is lack of co-operation from the side of the government officials and 30.8% of the respondents have knowledge about the Panchayat office and the Block Development Office.
- The respondents have very less information about the latest amendment in the Assam Panchayat Act, only 13.6% of them know about the criteria of two child and 35.6% of them do not have knowledge about the minimum educational qualification of the candidates.
- Most of the women are not aware about different government schemes for rural people due to lack of proper circulation and publication of information by the Panchayat offices. Because of this 35.2% of the respondents have never approached the G.P. offices for anything, 12.4% of them never met the G.P. members ever and 32% of the respondents have never attended the Gram Sabhas.
- It has been observed that the beneficiaries are selected for different schemes from amongst the close relatives of the elected members and from the party men of the ruling party.
- The official formalities and red-tapism has dissatisfied the poor village people and they have very less faith on any government system. It has been found from the field study that 45.2% of the respondents are house wives and 44.4% of them are daily labourer. The annual income of 42.4% of them is below 80,000/- and 14.8% of them have annual income less than 40,000/-. And 11.6% of them have reported that they do not have time because they have to engage themselves for

earning livelihood. Therefore, these poor section of people are least interested for politics.

- The beneficiaries are selected from among the close relatives of the elected members and from the party men of the ruling party.
- The awareness level of the women are very less as from the field study we have seen that 79.6% of them know about the 73rd Amendment Act only to some extent, 8.4% know it to a large extent and 4.8% do not have any knowledge about the Act, 36.8% of them got to know only after election is conducted, 30 % of them know it during the election and only 24.1% got to know about it before the election.
- Lack of constitutional, legal and political awareness among the women in rural areas is one of the prime causes of unwillingness of women in participation in local politics.
- Authorities constituted under Assam Panchayat Act 1994 are not functioning properly as expected. It was revealed from the study that 35.2% of the women never approached the office of the Panchayat or their elected representatives for their needs.
- There is mis-utilization of funds and corrupted system has discouraged the women to take active participation in the Panchayati Raj System.
- In so many places it is found that the husband was the candidate in that locality but as because that seat falls under the reserve category for women, now the wife or any other women relative of that man is projected as candidate from that

area. So the women act as proxies for men. However, 64.8% denied that they have been influenced by their husbands.

- Where the women are the proxies of any man then there will be intervention of that man over the elected woman in her functioning.
- Negative public opinion regarding women's leadership capacity is another reason why the women are not interested to participate in politics. As in the study, it is found that 11.2% of the respondents have faced non cooperation from the side of the village people.
- Illiteracy or low literacy level, limited or no exposure lead to a lack of confidence within the rural women. Nowadays free education is made compulsory and mid-day meal is also provided by the government in the government schools. But earlier these facilities were not available. It is found that highest number of respondents are have passed middle school which constitute 25.6% of the total respondents and 9.2% of them are illiterate, 21.2% have passed primary school, 18.8% have passed high school, 18.4% have passed higher secondary and only 6.8% of the total respondents have higher degrees.
- 32.4% of the women believe that lack of knowledge of the elected women representatives is one of the barriers to effective participation of women in the PRIs.
- Many women are unable to comprehend the true spirit of decentralization and recognize the opportunities that it provides.

- Sometime it is seen that the woman representative is dominated by other elected male members of the Panchayats. 12.8% of the women complained that they are dominated by the other male elected members of the Gram Panchayats.
- It is also found that less effort is made by the State Government to provide sufficient training to the elected women representatives about the working of the Panchayats who are very new in the field and are elected for the first time on the strength of reserve category. It is found in the study that 73.2% of the sample respondents were of the view that training is necessary for the PRIs members, especially the women members who have been elected for the first time and only 22.8% of them have replied negatively.
- It is found from the study that there is less monitoring facilities in the system. So whether the system is functioning properly or not nobody is concerned for that.
- There is lack of infrastructure and funds for proper functioning of the PRIs, 29.2% of the respondents reported that due to lack of fund the proper functioning of the PRIs not possible.
- The respondents have less knowledge about the sources of income of the Panchayats, because 35.6% of them think that the sources of fund generation are grant from the Central and State Governments, 26.8% of them believe that it is from taxes and fees levied by the PRIs, 20.4% thinks that it is from MP/MLA funds and only 4% of them do not have any ideas.
- It has been found from this study that in every five years, the participation of women in the Panchayat election is increasing. In Kaliabor block in the year 2001, the percentage of elected women representatives was 34%, where as it has

increased to 38% in the Panchayat election of 2007. Similarly in the Panchayat election of 2013, it has increased to 49% as the reservation of seats for women in Panchayat elections have been increased to 50% from 2013 election. In the year 2018 it increased to 55%.

- But in the elections of Assam Legislative Assembly and in the Lok-Sabha it is not rising accordingly. The numbers of elected women representatives are very less. In the last election of Assam Legislative Election it was only 6.35% where as in the Lok-Sabha Election it is 11.11% only.

These are the findings of the present study regarding the implementation of the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj System. This is true that there has been a revolutionary change brought by the provisions of the Panchayati Raj Act, 1992 in Assam. The participation of women is increasing day by day. As 50% seats are reserved for women, therefore, it is obvious to see increase in the quantitative participation of women in the Panchayati Raj System in Assam but it is seen that there are very less women in the Legislative Assembly in Assam and in the parliament as a result women from Assam are not actively participating in the governance of the Country.

It is also evident that women members are not free from hazards, although their number has been increased in Panchayats or growing consciousness about their rights and duties, they are not always successful in addressing some problems. Women are in a disadvantageous position in social milieu and they are often prevented from carrying out their work successfully. In some areas, women members are not given due respect by their male counterparts. Sometimes, the males steer the women members like remote control, using their dominance in the family. It was also noted that interactions between

bureaucrats and women members of PRIs were not always co-operative. This is clear from the views expressed by women members. Traditional cultural barriers which have struck its roots deep in the system are responsible for this unfortunate development. Still the society as a whole is male-dominated and patriarchal in nature.

7.3 Challenges Ahead

India still has far to achieve as per the goal enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India. It is well said by Shri K.R. Narayana, the former president of India, in his speech on the eve of Republic Day in the year 2001 that women have made an impact on Indian democracy at the grass-roots. He had also remarked that it is only logical to carry forward this process of empowerment. Women empowerment in politics might be a decisive factor that will purify and save the democratic politics of India from the deterioration of standard values, it is experiencing today.³

The preamble to our Constitution, as reflected in its provisions, particularly Part III, shows that our democracy is that of a free and open society as opposed to an unfree and closed society. Free and fair elections are basic postulates of a true democratic society, and under our Constitution elections are held on the basis of adult suffrage for every citizen who is not disqualified.⁴ Thus, only limitation imposed by the Constitution of India is age and not sex, caste, race, colour, religion or language.

Things all over the world are similar. Many factors are there that affects the ability of women to participate in the process of development. For a longtime, a certain image has been given to them. The household status the women hold, the educational and training background they have, their health status and the burden of work they have

³ Sinha, A.K., Panchayati Raj and Empowerment of Women, New Delhi, Northern Book Centre, 2004, p. 57

⁴ Seervai, H.M., Constitutional Law of India, Universal Law Publishing, Fourth Edition, Silver Jubilee Edition, Vol. 3, p.3073

to bear are some of the factors that affects the decision-making ability of women. Therefore, improving women's opportunities in the area of decision-making requires long-term strategies. They have to be systematic and they must aim at challenging prevailing structures. It has been recognized that empowerment is a process and this process has both individual and collective phases. It is a continuum and consists of several inter-related and mutually reinforcing components, such as awareness building, capacity building and skill development. Concrete measures are needed to remove many obstacles that make the process of participation difficult, new strategies for women to increase their access to decision-making needs to be developed.

Participation has two dimensions, quantitative and qualitative. Many a time only the quantitative aspect of participation is taken care of. Peoples' participation in terms of mere numbers has no meaning. Women often make up majority of the rank and file and comprise a minority as far as decision-making process is concerned. Today, there is a need for change. Change in the right direction, change from quantitative to qualitative. As long as women would be left behind in the process of decision-making, it would be hard to get the democratic process in practice. Active participation in social, economic and political spheres would help in enhancing the process of empowerment and it would also give women the desired self-respect and social dignity, and these, of course, are the pre-requisites of empowerment.

The major challenge for the future will be to bring in holistic approach for women's development; there should be harmonization of various efforts in the area of social, economic, legal, political and cultural fields. This calls for consolidation of various programmes and efforts in different sectors of the Government, and their integration in a logical fashion for coverage of various services and facilities required by women. Panchayati Raj System is a great step towards the mobilization and

organization of the rural women. The organization of women will by itself empower them and provide them a forum for articulating their needs and contributing their perspectives to development. This will also give them experience in participatory decision-making, thereby building up a cadre of grass-roots leaders, capable of effective participation in institutions of local government.

This capacity building has to start in the womb, without any deprivation, for the mother of the child, particularly the girl child. Her survival, protection and development as identified in the National Plan of Action for Girl Child (2016) has to echo through all sectoral programmes. Access to education, health, information and resources are, therefore, the vital areas of concern that need to be effectively addressed in future to attain many of the goals for the next millennium. The thrust in the future has to be on identifying traditional sectors of employment that are shrinking due to technology changes or market shifts, and retrain the women to take up jobs in the new and expanding areas of employment.

The provision of support services is another critical input that can greatly improve women's enhanced economic participation. Promoting women's labour market mobility through an expanding network of working women's hostels, the provision of toilet facilities for women at work places and wide-spread provision of crèches for working parents etc. are essential if women are to derive maximum benefits from the economic liberalization process.

Without the true participation of women in the governance and developmental programmes, true democracy can never exist. Equal participation of men and women in the developmental process is very essential to attain desired goals set to achieve. Gender and development taken together is emerging as a progressive approach. It is a part of

larger basket of creating alternative models for development. For a dynamic approach, which looks beyond the economic analysis, it is essential to include environmental, sustainable and qualitative aspects of development into its models, which are progressive in nature.

Empowerment could be a planning goal in the sense that the governmental support is extended to the voluntary sector as well, both in the field of implementation as well as policy formulation. Empowering women could, thus, be through economic intervention as well as through integrated intervention. In the first intervention, employment, income generation and access to credit is what would be looked into and in the second intervention, integrated developmental programmes would come to the forefront. The 21st century has new challenges to be faced. With the help of lessons learnt we have to march forward.

7.4 Answering the Research Questions

In the first chapter of the present study, the researcher had set two questions to carry forward her study. From the perusal of all data, it can be said that the 33 per cent reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has brought a revolutionary change in the life of the rural women. The enormous possibilities and potential that exist among rural women have been realized when they have come to power due to reservation at the Panchayat levels. Elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions held after enacting the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, in Assam have witnessed an appreciable turnout of women as voters as well as candidates. The 73rd Amendment and new provision of 50 per cent reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam have given ample opportunity for the entry of large number of socially backward category such as women to enter into the domain of local institutions and their performance is very encouraging. It would provide

a path to bring a sense of gender equality. By taking part in the decision making process, both directly and indirectly, women have gained confidence. They have started to raise their voice for assuring their rights, their awareness level has increased, and they are exercising their power as elected leaders and thus living a dignified life.

It has come to light from the afore-discussed chapters and the empirical study conducted in Kaliabor block of Nagaon district by the researcher that, even if women are elected, they have to face so many other problems. There are a number of obstacles which come in the way of active participation and actual representation of women in politics. These includes poverty, lack of education, the patriarchal mode of society, too much dependency on others, lack of awareness of political rights which hamper the women's ability to take independent decisions. Criminalization in politics had a negative impact on women's participation in politics. Sometimes, they have to face harassment, both physical and mental. Instances are there where they received even death threats. In some cases, men want to retain power by proxy and they coax their womenfolk to fight elections on reserved seats. The 73rd Amendment Act in the Constitution though ensures 33 per cent reservation under Article 243D (3), of the Constitution of India in PRIs but the criminalization of politics, male dominance, illiteracy and domestic compulsions obstruct women's active participation in the political process.

Thus answering the second questions that has been put forwarded by the researcher in the beginning of her study it can be concluded that the participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is more quantitative than qualitative.

7.5 Recommendations

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India succeeded in bringing a critical mass of one-third (in Assam it is 50 per cent) women representatives in the Panchayats and addressed women's political marginality. However, this marginality cannot be countered only by numerically expanded presence in the institutions of governance. It is also influenced by what these institutions are in terms of their autonomy and resources and how women's own human capital is enhanced and supported for participation and leadership. Women's political presence in Panchayats mandated by the Constitutional amendment and facilitated by subsequent elections was also expected to contribute to the political and overall empowerment of those entering these institutions. This required their effective participation and support and institutional help. The empowering potential of this instrument will also depend substantially on the empowerment of Panchayats in terms of their role, resources, mandates, autonomy and self-reliance. Despite of continuous efforts at international, national and regional levels, it has been observed that the active political participation of women is very less across the world including India. In India, all the efforts have been made by the legislatures, executive and judiciary to enhance the social status of women, but it is not successful all the time and so many challenges are there to be overcome by the women to achieve the goal as enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India for the women to live a dignified life. From the extensive study made by the researcher in this area, a few recommendations are forwarded for the better implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act and to achieve the objective set for by this Amendment Act for the empowerment of women.

- Section 243G of the 73rd Amendment Act to the Constitution of India should be further amended, because it has called for the Panchayats to become institutions

of self-government and exhorted the state legislatures to endow them with power and authority necessary to make them such institutions and in the same Section 243G (a) & (b) it spoke only of planning for economic development and social justice and implementing schemes entrusted to them including those in the XI Schedule.

- Schedule XI is neither mandatory nor exclusive in the adoption of the list for devolution of responsibilities to Panchayats in individual states and as such it makes this schedule only a set of 'Directive Principle of State Panchayat Policy' or as a wish list. Therefore, this should be made mandatory.
- The rhetoric of 'Gram Swaraj', making Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), institutions of self-government was not matched by real devolution of power and resources. Practically these institutions are the agency for implementing centrally conceived schemes with their funding, conditionality, restrictions, number of beneficiaries, etc. So more autonomy should be given to these institutions to make it self-governance in true sense.
- The elected women representatives remain preoccupied with understanding and mastering centrally issued guidelines and responding to petitions and problems primarily by forwarding them to higher levels. So this system should be changed and more and more power should be given to the Panchayats so that people get the scope for active participation.
- Lack of financial and administrative autonomy coupled with the high-pitched rhetoric is really problematic as the new social groups and women from these groups come to Panchayats with high expectations. So, financial and administrative autonomy should be provided to the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

- People have high expectations from their elected representatives. But as they are disappointed and powerless they cannot fulfill the expectations of the people. So from the other side the representatives are disempowered. The government should do the needful so that the elected representative should have the power to fulfill the expectations of the people.
- The village Panchayat is the core institution in Panchayati Raj and grass-roots democracy but it has been observed that more emphasis is given in the district and block levels while giving remuneration, minister's status, powers and privileges to the chairpersons and members. More emphasis should be given to the Gram Panchayats because they are working in the grass-roots level.
- Section 3 of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 deals with the constitution of District Planning Committee, which is nothing but replacing the self-governance of Panchayati Raj by the subordination of the government. Because Section 3 (2) (a) says that it must consist of the members of the house of people who represent the whole or part of the district and section 3(2) (b) of the Act says that it must also include the members of the Assam Legislative Assembly whose major part of the constituencies fall within the district. So the very concept of local self-government is destroyed. It is not the governments run by the people but the government is running the people. Very less scope is left in the hands of the elected (women) representatives to plan for their people. So the system of district planning commission should be abolished.
- The president of Gram Panchayat is entrusted with long list of responsibilities under Section 13(1) (a) of the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, which is not possible for him/her to perform.

- It has been seen that the secretaries appointed for the help and support of the President are paid very less salary. So, they are not so interested to perform their duty and most of the time found them to be engaged in corruptions. So the workers should be well paid.
- The women who had entered in the politics had to face so many problems for the age old mind set of the people. They have to keep on fighting for their own existence. And society has less trust on those women. Awareness programme should be organized to change the mindset of the people.
- The problem of caste and gender are two most significant issues which can be considered as barrier in the development of the status of women in the society and less interest of the women to participate in politics. So social matter should be taken care of and awareness programme should be organized to make the people sensitized.
- The mandatory rotation of reservation under Section 9 (3) is discouraging future growth of women's leadership particularly where it is not known which seats/posts would be reserved next time. It may be desirable to lay down the method of rotation and indicate the future order of reserved positions in advance, at least for the next three elections, to complete one cycle of rotation so that contestants can prepare themselves to work in available constituencies.
- In the present study two contradictory trends were seen in selection of women candidates for the Panchayats. In the one hand there was a trend of preference for educated, articulate women and on the other hand it has been observed that the women who were active in politics from earlier were not given preferences but those women who were weak, submissive and who could be managed easily

were given preferences by males. This is totally a social problem and can only be changed with the change in the mind set of the people in the society. Various sensitization programme may be fruitful in this regard.

- The elected women continued to be subjected to the dichotomies of her twin role. In one hand her ostensible power and authority in the Panchayat and on the other hand her relative powerlessness within the home. So, the family should support the women and help her to boost up her confidence so that she can exercise the power and authority entrusted to her by the Panchayati Raj Act.
- One of the major problems faced by the women is when they take help from family members it is considered as proxy and if they take help from outsider or frequently interact with other male members of the society it leads to allegations of sexual liaison. Thus, women representatives are facing a strong backlash while they are going to exercise their power and authority, and indiscriminately labeled as proxies to discredit the policy instrument of reservation for women in political institutions. These matters should be discussed in the policy making level and measures should be taken accordingly.
- The study reveals women's low levels of mobility, seclusion, lack of information and skills, internalized low self-image, lack of confidence and gender division of labour acted as barriers to the effective participation in the public sphere and the transformative potential of the new reservation. Strategic plans should be taken to remove these barriers.
- The report of the State Finance Commission is not taken seriously and generally no actions are taken against those reports. So the report of the State Finance Commission should be taken seriously.

- It has been observed that in many cases District Planning Commission were not established and where they were established, they were unable to formulate plans. So the District Planning Commission should run smoothly. Without proper planning Panchayati Raj Institutions can not be made successful.
- So many times the Panchayats are deprived of funds through schemes like the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS), which earmarks funds to MPs for activities that were the legitimate responsibility of the Panchayats. This scheme is implemented by the district administration. So, Panchayats are helpless and powerless in this matter. Proper autonomy should be given to the Panchayats to make it a successful institution.
- The functions of the local administration were not transferred to the Panchayats, and remained part of their own hierarchies. Due to the lack of staff, the Panchayats are dependent on the district administrative staff. In this situation, the bureaucracy is not made subordinate to democratic institutions, but is set up to regulate them. Therefore, it cannot be said as the local self-government. The infrastructure of the Panchayati Raj system should be improved.
- Parallel bodies are also established with that of Panchayati Raj Institutions. In the changed governance styles, two kinds of things happened. One is the conceptualization of decentralization in terms of the dispersal of institutions rather than the empowerment of local democratic institutions. Decentralization is thought more in terms of de-concentration, leading to the creation of multiple bodies for delivering specific services to particular groups. Such institutions multiplied as donor agencies preferred this arrangement for providing development aid. The sprouting and flourishing of these specialized bodies can

be ascribed to the skepticism of policy makers and bureaucrats regarding the abilities of the local institutions.

- The Panchayati Raj Act is a very complicated legislation with the complex mechanism, technical terms etc. it should be written in a simplified way, and so that simple village people also can understand it.
- The role of media must be mentioned here. The electronic media can come forward to sensitize the masses about the mechanism of the Panchayati Raj Act in the villages.
- The existing laws of Panchayati Raj Act, various plans, policies and programmes of government under this act can be popularized through articles published in newspapers and magazines.
- The websites are available but information are not available and up to date in the official websites of the Panchayats and block offices. It should be maintained properly.
- There should be free information centre in every village about the various schemes, programmes and planning of the government under this Act.
- The government should form an independent monitoring agency to look after the matters under this act.
- Gender emphasis on peoples' participation by policy-makers and growing gender awareness among people, would create a favorable climate where empowerment could get a fertile land to flourish.

- Expansion of educational opportunities for women will make the women educated and will make them aware about their various rights, including their political rights.
- Not only legislative but also legal measures should be taken to safe guards the political rights of women and also equal opportunities for participation in the decision-making process.
- Training programme should be arranged for the management of the resources channelized from the Central and State Government under various developmental schemes.
- It should be made compulsory to attend the training courses which are being presently conducted for the elected members of PRIs by the Assam Government through State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) and block headquarters of different districts.
- Representation of women in the rural and local level bodies had enabled representation of nearly a million women at the grass-roots level who play a very important catalytic role in enhancing the status and dignity of women in the society. Similar representation in State Legislative and Parliament would further strengthen the process of empowerment of women.
- In the process of political empowerment, the Non-governmental organizations, Community based Organizations, Self-Help-Groups and Mahila Mandal etc. can play very effective role. Self-Help-Groups should be encouraged, so that the groups can bring positive change in the political empowerment and socio-economic development of women. Organizing women into Self-Help-Groups

marks the beginning of a major process of empowering women by strengthening their capacity for decision-making and participation in politics. Mahila Mandal can also be used in the rural areas as effective instruments to organize and mobilize women. It should become more active not just conducting self-dependent activities but also encourage women to participate in political activities. They should motivate women to contests the Panchayati Raj elections.

- Women representative should be paid well. So that they need not to be dependent on anybody and free to take independent decision. It will also keep them motivated towards their duty.
- Under Section 4 of the Act, Provision should be made for the compulsory attendance of the women representative in the meetings.
- Proxy male members should be barred to attend meetings on behalf of the women and it should be made punishable.
- Initiative should be taken from Government side for wide publicity to motivate the rural women to participate in Panchayat's activities by means of public meetings, pamphlets, booklets, audio-visual aids and advertisements through newspapers, radio, television and newsreels etc. A sustainable campaign through the print, electronic and folk media is necessary on various issues related to women empowerment.
- The bureaucrats and other officials are expected to co-operate with the women representatives. They should not be neglected on the ground of ignorance. As few of the women are very new in the field of politics. So they need the help, co-

operation and empathy of the people with whom they have to work to make Panchayati Raj system a successful institution.

- Women, on their own should also develop a positive attitude towards politics. Women should not confine themselves to the four walls of their homes but should come out of their domestic and traditional role assignment and spare time to take part in politics. So ample opportunity should be given to the women to take part in various political activities.
- Gram Sabha which is constituted under Section 4 of the Assam Panchayat Act should be vested with more power and functions, because Gram Sabha is the only body where each and every voter can raise his/her voice. It is very unfortunate that this body has been totally marginalized.
- At the time of conducting the research work, the researcher had to approach various offices of Panchayat, Block Development office and the statistical and economic department of Assam Government etc. But due to lack of support from these offices the researcher had to face many hurdles and the research work got delayed. Therefore, the offices should be more co-operative, so that more quality research work could be done.

While examining the evolution of the concept of dignity of women in India in general and rural women specifically and the laws related to empowerment of women situated within a patriarchal social structure, discrimination against women is a foregone conclusion. Caste, class, clan, and gender are maintained through a strict sexual control. Punitive deterrent measures and denial of economic rights are the means through which this control is exercised. In India the picture is very much contradictory. On one hand

they are worshiped and on the other hand they are subjected to various mental and physical cruelties, inside and outside the home.

This study set out to explore whether traditionally, within this constrained sphere, there were spaces through which women's right to live with dignity could be established. And also, whether the statutory interventions, both local and international have led to widening of this constrained sphere or not. The study also examined the role of judiciary in interpreting the statutory provisions in favour of women for upliftment of the position of women in the society. It also examined the political participation of women as an instrument of women empowerment. The study examined how reservation of women in politics could make a difference in the living of a woman in the society. To examine the above mentioned issues one block, i.e., Kaliabor block of Nagaon district, from Assam has been chosen as model.

The study reveals that though there is no such specific definition of dignity but it possesses different meaning at different stages of human civilization. Recently, it has been incorporated in the various national and international documents as a Western philosophical-cum-political concept. The concept has been incorporated in the constitution of India after its independence only. One of the main objective and philosophy of the Constitution of India is to assured a dignified life to its entire people. Various provisions have been incorporated in the Constitution of India to achieve that goal. It has been realized by the maker of the Constitution of India that without establishing equality among the people this goal could never be achieved. Few special provisions have also been incorporated to bring the women as well other back ward classes of the society to equal footing to that of the advanced community. Reservation policy has also been adopted to achieve this goal.

The judiciary and the legislatures played a vital role in the development of the condition of women in India. The Legislatures have enacted various laws for the welfare and empowerment of women from time to time according to the need and demand of its people. Judiciary while deciding various cases define the concept of dignity. Judiciary has given emphasis on acknowledging the value and worth of all individuals as members of the society for the requirement of the Constitutional protection of dignity. Dignity recognizes a person as a free being who develops his or her body and mind as he or she sees fit. The root of the dignity lies on the autonomy of the private will, and a person's freedom of choice and of action. Human dignity rests on recognition of the physical and spiritual integrity of the human being, his or her humanity, and his or her value as a person, irrespective of the utility he can provide to others.

Participation increases the capacity of human being to develop their decision-making quality and the capacity to take action. By participation of rural women in politics means a kind of local autonomy in which they discover the possibilities of exercising choice and thereby becoming capable of managing their own development. Thus, political participation of women provides them the opportunity for their all round development of personality which can provide them a life with dignity.

The reservation of seats for women in politics is a good step to enhance their participation in politics. The reservation for women in Panchayats was the beginning for the presence of women in these institutions. However, only presence will make no difference, they are expected to participate effectively. Effective participation would require not only physical presence but also articulation, joining discussions, taking up issues and problems of their constituents and efforts for solving problems and getting results. Effective participation depends on a number of factors including the historical

context of these institutions, their composition and legal framework, the social base of the participants and the supports and obstacles.

The 73rd Amendment Act came into existence and became effective from 24th April 1993. One year time was given to the states to bring their Panchayat legislation in conformity with its provisions as application of any legal provisions not in conformity could be successfully questioned in any court of law. Accordingly, the states enacted new Panchayat laws or amended their existing Panchayat laws. In effect, there was no difference in the two approaches as the new laws substantially continued existing structural features, powers, functions, control, etc., except where specific changes had to be included for reservation of seats, state election commission, state finance commission, and the powers of Panchayats, etc., required by the Amendment. Following this development, Assam Panchayat Raj Act, 1994 was passed with features in conformity with the new provisions of the Indian Constitution with regard to Panchayati Raj.

The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 has come into force on 5th May, 1994. This Act has retained the three tier system of Panchayati Raj Institutions. These institutions are Gaon Panchayat at the village level, the Anchalik Panchayat at the Block level and the Zilla Parishad at the District level. The Act extends all over the rural areas of Assam, except the autonomous district under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India and area under Autonomous Councils established under State Legislation. It also excluded any area which is included in a Municipality or a Town Committee or a Cantonment or a Municipal Corporation.

The Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 has made provision for 1/3rd reservation of seats for women in the Panchayat bodies and in accordance with this provision 2001 and

2007 Panchayat elections provided 33 per cent reservation of seats to women. On 10th November, 2012 the Assam Government has brought some modifications in reservation policy and announced 50 per cent reservation of seats for women in Panchayat bodies. The Government further stated that the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe women would also enjoy the 50% seats reservation in the Panchayats. Accordingly, in the Panchayat elections of 2013 and 2018, there was 50% reservation of seats for women in all Panchayats bodies of Assam. Under this new system four elections of PRIs have been held in Assam, in December 2001, December 2007, February 2013 and December 2018. In the election of 2001, women have secured 34 percent, in 2007 election they have secured 38 percent seats, in the election of 2013 women have secured 49 percent seats and in 2018 they have secured 55 per cent of seats.

But, in spite of all these, the number of elected women to the Assam Legislative Assembly has never exceeded 12 per cent from the first Assembly to the 14th assembly. In the first Assembly there was only one woman member. It increased to five in the second assembly. The highest number of women members were elected to the 13th Legislative Assembly constituted in 2011. In this Assembly, 11 per cent of members were women. On the contrary, there are only 8 women candidates who have been elected to the 14th Assam Legislative Assembly in 2016. It comprises only 6.35 per cent of the total 126 member-house. During the election, a higher turn-out of women voters was witnessed with 84.81 per cent of the total 92,09,928 female voters exercising their franchise. Before this, in the Lok Sabha election of 2014, only 2 women were elected to the Lok-Sabha out of 16 women candidates, and there is only one women MP from Assam out of total 27 women members of the Upper House.

From the above numerical facts, it can be said that the women of Assam have been taking active role in various social and political movements but very few have

been elected to represent the assembly and in the parliament. In order to enhance women's participation in politics, at the very outset, it is necessary to overcome the various hurdles that come in the way of their duties and responsibilities. The spread of education, political awareness, competence, willingness, self-confidence and motivation among the women representatives and the encouragement and support from their family, society and political parties will help in bringing women leaders in the mainstream of political arena. Unfortunately, by bringing more and more women in day to day activities of three tiers of Panchayati Raj System, the Government has emboldened them a lot. Even then, the women are not completely shackle free.

Women's presence at the decision-making levels will not only enhance the status of women but will also strengthen democratic traditions and make democracy more meaningful in fighting injustice and oppression, while at the same time help to bring different, explicitly female perspective to the political arena. Unless women are brought into the decision-making levels directly, important women issues will never be tackled with the seriousness they require. It is very much necessary that women should actively participate in the PRIs which are at present monopolized by men. This is not only for the sake of the democratic principle, but also for their own sake to voice their grievances and assert their position to benefit from the issues which directly affect them and for which there are no other appropriate forums to seek redressal. Their participation would also help in bettering the conditions of women and improving their status in the society and hence add directly to the well being of households in particular and that of the nation at large.

It is a humble submission of the researcher that the present study will be very much relevant to the present context and will be able to draw the attention of the people who are in the policy making level, the legislatures, the politicians, the intellectuals and

of course the women of this country. It will also help students of the subject to do in depth studies in future. Further, the researcher hopes that this study will help the process of empowerment of women in this country and will contribute in the realization of democracy in the true sense.