

**WOMEN IN POLITICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURI WOMEN
IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS OF SOUTH ASSAM**

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Chapter – 6

Summary and Conclusion

The principal objective underlying the present study is to examine and compare the nature and extent of political participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in rural and urban areas of south Assam. It tries to find out the variables that influence political participation and also the relationship between political participation and self-assertion as well as empowerment of women. As mentioned in the preceding chapters, politics is a very broad, complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It includes within its purview all the activities, from management to peoples' participation that are directly or indirectly associated with the governance of a state. Therefore, within the broad ambit of politics, the present study focuses on the concept of political participation which is one of the most fundamental ingredients of democracy and as such occupies a prominent place. Political participation denotes a series of voluntary activities, both conventional and un-conventional, which have a bearing on the political processes and are designed to influence Governmental decision-making. Conventional political activities includes voting, campaign activities, membership of political parties and voluntary organizations or pressure groups, contesting elections, making political contacts, while un-conventional political activities are protests, strikes, political demonstrations etc. Apart from the nature and extent of political participation, the study has also made an attempt to examine the level of political awareness of Bishnupriya Manipuri women, their attitudes and role towards politics and decision making, the problems and challenges faced by them and the impact of reservation policy on their political participation and empowerment.

The present study focuses on the women of Bishnupriya Manipuri community of both rural and urban areas of south Assam mainly three districts of Barak valley i.e. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The Bishnupriya Manipuri community is an economically backward and a microscopic linguistic minority community living in Assam since ages. A small section of this group of people is also living in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam and other parts within and outside the country like Bangladesh etc. Regarding their settlement compared to urban, a large number of Bishnupriya Manipuri people reside in rural areas of south Assam. For the purpose of the study a total number of 463 respondents have been selected from both rural and

urban areas of south Assam. For the purpose of selection of respondents a method of multi-stage sampling has been used. At the first stage a sample of both the areas from south Assam where a substantial number of Bishnupriya Manipuri people are settled have been selected through the technique of purposive sampling. In the second stage samples have been collected from the selected areas through the technique of simple random sampling. Thus, out of total 463 samples, 271 have been drawn from rural areas, while 192 from the urban areas. The data for the study have been collected both from the primary and secondary sources. The primary data has been collected through interview schedule, while the secondary data has been collected from books, journals, government records etc.

➤ **Participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in electoral activities:**

The study reveals that voting is the most popular mode of political activity among the rural and urban Bishnupriya Manipuri women though the turnout is slightly higher in rural (98.5%) than the urban areas (91.1%). Thus, no significant difference is observed between rural and urban women so far as their extent of voting turnout is concerned. However, it is true that voting is an activity in which even the least involved and uninterested voters can be mobilized. Therefore, high voting turnout does not essentially lead to high level of participation of women because there is a weak relationship between voting and other modes of political participation. Regarding the influence of males on the voting choice, the study reveals that as compared to urban (29.7%) more percentage of women from rural areas (45.7%) come under the influence of males while casting their votes. Nevertheless, in both rural and urban areas majority of respondents i.e. 54.3% and 70.3% respectively have exercised their voting choice without male influence. Besides, so far as the benefits of voting are concerned the study reveals that compared to rural (77.2%), a little more numbers of women from urban areas (88.6%) have mentioned that casting vote is certainly beneficial as it is a recognition of their citizenship which enable them to participate in the democratic process of the nation irrespective of gender, cast, community, language etc. Regarding the reasons of voting, majority of women in both rural and urban areas i.e. 54.3% and 70.3% respectively mainly those who deny the influence of males on their voting choice mentioned that as women they are not less capable than men to participate in the electoral process and formation of a democratic government. Thus, they mentioned

assertion of identity as women eventually leads them to cast their vote and the percentage is found higher in urban than in rural areas. However, it is important to mention that though in matters of voting majority of women enjoy freedom of choice and mentioned assertion of their identity for voting but regarding actual empowerment and decision making most of them are found not that assertive and independent. Apart from assertion of identity, a considerable percentage of women i.e. 35.9% and 31.4% in rural and urban areas respectively consider opportunity to cast vote as the reason for their participation in voting. Factors such as job assurance, monetary or material benefits, opportunity to elect candidate of own choice do not appear as important for voting as very few respondents i.e. less than 10% from both rural and urban areas cast their vote on the basis of these factors.

In case of political campaigning though a considerable percentage of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in rural areas participated (46.5%), the participation of urban women is not encouraging (21.9%). Compared to rural, the Bishnupriya Manipuri women in urban areas are found to be apathetic, less enthusiastic and less interested in political campaigning. Moreover, motivation by political parties to these women for political campaigning is very low as they belong to a linguistic minority community which does not contribute much to the vote bank politics. Thus, due to the lack interest coupled with lack of opportunity, party motivation as well as lack of time from domestic and personal works, participation of urban Bishnupriya Manipuri women in this political act is lower than rural women. On the other hand in rural areas political parties show their interest and support to involve them in political activities as there is sizeable numbers of Bishnupriya Manipuri people. Apparently, Bishnupriya women in rural areas are found to be interested to participate as there are candidates from their own community who contest at the local level election. Thus, the sense of community affinity motivates Bishnupriya women to go out for campaigning. So far as participation in different types of campaigning is concerned no significant difference is observed between rural and urban women. In both the rural and urban areas, women like to participate in the campaigning such as door to door campaigning within the village or town, attending political meetings than the difficult and time demanding such as collecting funds, preparing/pasting posters and distributing pamphlets. It indicates that the more difficult and time demanding an activity, the less is the participation of women in it.

The study reveals that compared to other modes of political activities participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in contesting elections is very pathetic. Only a small proportion of rural women (9.6%) are found to have contested for election, while smaller is the percentage of urban women (3.6%). Besides, in both rural and urban areas participation is limited to local level elections only as none of them has ever contested or interested to contest for Assembly and parliamentary elections. Apart from lack of interest the fear of losing election, as they belong to a linguistic minority community with lower voting strength, is one of the significant reasons for the non-participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women at the state and national level elections. Thus, Bishnupriya Manipuri women are poorly represented in decision making bodies which adversely affecting their empowerment and development. Moreover, regarding winning an election at the local level, the study reveals that compared to urban (28.6%), the percentage of women who won the election is not only higher in rural areas (61.5%) but the difference is also quite noteworthy. The main reason of lower percentage of winning an election by urban Bishnupriya women is not getting sufficient votes as they belong to a linguistic minority community and compared to rural their population is very less in urban areas, while voters from other caste and communities are divided and votes are polled according to their priorities and interests. Thus, the extent of political participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in contesting elections is not only low but they still continue to be excluded from legislative bodies at national and state level and are deprived from key decision making positions in Government. So far as the basis of contesting elections are concerned, the study reveals that in rural areas reservation policy and political party support play a vital role as more numbers of women (46.2% and 42.3% respectively) have contested election on the basis of these two factors. Besides, a sizeable percentage of women (38.5%) stand to contest election due to the inspiration of family, friends and society. On the contrary in urban areas lowest percentages of women (14.3%) have contested election based on reservation policy and persuasion of friends and society. Besides compared to rural, party persuasion is also found low as only 28.6% women contested due to political party support. However, family support plays a significant role as the percentage of women who contested election due to family inspiration stands highest (42.9%) among other factors. Thus, unlike rural areas, in urban centers the population of Bishnupriya Manipuri community is very less on the hand and political parties are reluctant to provide support base on the other, reservation policy alone does not appear much

helpful to motivate Bishnupriya women to stand and contest for elections. The positive impact of reservation policy however cannot be fully denied as due to reservation at least few women stand to contest elections at the local level where as at the state and national level where there is no reservation, the participation of Bishnupriya women as candidate is nonexistent. Nevertheless, the study reveals that political interest among women is not praiseworthy as only 19.2% from rural and 14.3% from urban areas contested election on the basis of their own interest.

➤ **Participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in other political activities:**

Political participation is not limited to electoral political activities only. Rather there are other modes of political participation including un-conventional activities which greatly affect the working of a democratic political system. In fact a true democracy demands as well as encourages the engagement of people in different other political activities be it taking membership of pressure groups or voluntary organizations, involvement in state affairs through party membership and making political contacts for any socio-economic or political issues either individually or through group. Apart from that in contemporary times participation in un-conventional activities such as strikes, protests or political demonstrations becomes one of the most effective and popular mode of political participation. In many times people opt for these un-conventional activities in order to accomplish their divergent interests and demands from the government. Therefore, the present study also examines the nature and extent of participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in other political activities such as taking membership of political parties and pressure groups, un-conventional political activities, making political contacts individually or through group and political discussion.

The study reveals that participation of both rural and urban women in taking party membership is very low i.e. 11.8% and 5.2% respectively and compared to rural it is very insignificant in urban areas. In both rural and urban areas among the women who have so far taken party membership majority are either ordinary or active members confined mainly to village/town, block or district level. There is hardly anyone who has taken membership at the state and national level. However, in rural areas few women are found to hold higher portfolios i.e. executive status in party hierarchies though the

percentage is very negligible (3.1%), while there is none in urban areas who hold such executive position. The reason may be explained by the fact that belonging to a microscopic community with low voting strength in urban areas hardly any political party is interested to provide executive status and important portfolios to the Bishnupriya women in the party hierarchy. Equally true is that women themselves in both rural and urban areas are neither interested to take party membership nor like to hold higher position in the party hierarchies as it requires more time and active involvement which they cannot due to their domestic and other responsibilities. Apparently, lack of opportunity as well as family restriction, perception of party membership as masculine activity, lack of competence to work etc. are some other reasons for non-participation by women.

In case of taking pressure group membership the study reveals no significant difference between rural and urban areas. Almost similar percentages of rural and urban women i.e. 40.2% and 38.5% respectively are members of various pressure groups such as Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Women Organization, Amugmanjuri Social Organization for Women, Swarna Bharat Democratic Mahila Samiti, Makhail social organization, Pakaipar Mahila Samiti, Nayagram Women Development Society, Nabajagaran Women Organization, Nabadya Mahila Samiti (Katakhal), Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Student union, Narshingpur Block women organization, Northeastern Development Council, Democratic Youth Federation of India, Women Welfare Society, Bharat scout guide, All India Democratic Association for equal rights for women etc. Thus, comparatively participation of both rural and urban women in pressure groups is higher than party membership. This may be due to the fact that compared to party activities; women find group activities as more beneficial to articulate various socio-economic demands by pressurizing the government. Often the pressure groups help women to deal with various societal issues such as domestic violence, dowry, divorce etc. Besides, pressure groups help women to deal with their economic problems by undertaking certain program through which financial assistance in terms of loans and other materials of production is provided to women to make them self dependent. Above all it gives organizational support and sense of authority to women not only to deal with different issues related to their family and society but also to draw the attention of the government to their problems and demands redress. Nevertheless, compared to rural, women in urban centers do not find their group

membership as much helpful to influence the government policy. Only 41.9% of urban women as against 70.6% in rural areas find pressure group membership helpful for them to influence government to accomplish their demands.

In respect of participation of women in un-conventional political activities such as strikes, protests and political demonstrations, the study reveals that majority of women from both rural and urban areas are less inclined to participate. Only a small proportion of women i.e. 21% in rural and 26% in urban areas participated which is not noteworthy. Among other factors, lack of interest is the main reason for the lower participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in this act. Moreover, compared to strikes and protests, participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in political demonstration is found very low in both rural and urban areas. This may be due to the lesser impact of political demonstration on government.

The study also reveals that making political contacts either individually or group is not a popular mode of political activity among the rural and urban women. Very few respondents from both rural (18.5%) and urban (20.3%) areas have made political contacts on any socio-political issue, while a large majority of respondents are found not interested to participate. Apart from lack of interest, lack of time from domestic and other family responsibilities, perception of this activity as male's activity etc. also contributed to the lower participation in this mode by women. Besides, the urban women think that instead of individual effort, making collective contact is more productive. But unfortunately in this regard it has been observed that there is a lack of willingness and concern among majority of women for which they could not communicate collectively and raise their voice to any political leaders or government officials for any socio-political issue. The study also reveals that political communication by the rural and urban women is limited to either Panchayat members or Government officials and Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the district. Very few respondents from rural and even fewer from urban areas have communicated with Member of Parliament (MP) of their constituency, while none of the respondents from both rural and urban areas has communicated with Chief Minister (CM) of the state. The reason may be due to the non-responsive or apathetic nature of Member of Parliament of their constituency as they do not belong to the dominant group and does not contribute much to the vote bank politics. Notwithstanding this, lack of confidence

and hesitation on the part of the Bishnupriya Manipuri women also restrict them to communicate with higher echelons or authorities such as Chief Minister than other local representatives or government officials.

In case of political discussion, the study reveals that comparatively participation is higher (46.4%) in urban areas than the rural areas (38.7%). Moreover, compared to party or group and friends or colleagues, majority of women in both rural and urban areas would like to discuss about political issues with family members. Nevertheless, in both the rural and urban areas majority of women do not participate in political discussions. The reasons may be explained by the fact of the lack of political interest among women coupled with the lack of time and opportunity at their disposal due to various domestic works as well as family responsibilities on their shoulder. Besides, some of the respondents opined they that are not allowed by the male members of the family to participate in such political discussion.

➤ **Impact of different socio-economic variables:**

Political participation to a great extent is influenced by vary many factors such as - a) Psychological, b) Socio-economic and c) Political. All the three sets of variables are closely linked and intermingled. A change in any of them can, therefore increase or decrease participation. The present study, however, mainly examines the socio-economic variables as they are closely related to psychological and political variables. When participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in different modes of political activities is analyzed in relation to various socio-economic variables such as age, education, marital status, structure of the family, background of the family, occupation and family income the following picture emerges.

❖ **Voting** – In a democracy voting participation reflects the involvement of citizens in electoral process though which citizens express their opinion in the election of a political representative and formation of a democratic government. In case of voting, the study reveals that in rural areas proportion of participation is very high irrespective of the socio-economic variables and a very little variation is found among the rural women in their extent of participation. In case of urban areas though voting participation is encouraging but in respect of socio-economic variables it is found that comparatively age, marital status and

occupation become more influential than the other variables like structure of the family, background of the family and family income. It is found that compared to the old and middle age groups, the turn out of the younger age group 18 – 30 is lowest (75.6%). Similarly compared to married and widow, participation of un-married women is found lowest (80.6%) and occupation wise it is the students who are less inclined to cast their votes (68.8%) compared to other occupational groups. This is because majority of younger age respondents are students and un-married who often missed the opportunity to cast their vote due to their mobility either for studies or finding better jobs. Unlike rural areas an inverse relation is observed between education and voting participation. The turnout of illiterates and lower or primary educated women is highest i.e. 100% while highly educated women i.e. post-graduate and above stands lowest (75%). This is due to the fact that highly educated women in urban centers are more analytical and rational due to their education as well as greater exposure to mass media and often abstains from voting out of their dissatisfaction with the political system where vote bank politics is rampant. Another reason is their absence at the time of election as they were out of station for personal or official works.

- ❖ **Political campaigning** – In respect of political campaigning, the study reveals that in rural areas political campaigning is higher among the women belonging to the age group of 41 – 50 (56.5%) followed by the age group of 51 – 60 (53.1%); high school educated (60.3%); married (48%); nuclear families (48%); belonging to political families (65.3%); among the socio-political activists (100%) followed by business group (47.4%); and among the higher family income (50.5%). Thus, the variables such as age, family background and occupation appear more influential than marital status, structure of the family and family income. Though education is positively related but compared to lower educated participation of higher educated women is found less. In urban areas proportion of participation is found higher among the age group of 31 – 40 (32%); illiterates (33.3%); married (25.4%); joint families (23.3%); political families (36%); socio-political activists (100%) and lower income groups (28.1%). Thus, age, marital status, family background and occupation show positive relation while education and income are inversely related. Compared to

educated, more number of illiterates participated in this act, similarly participation is higher among the lower income group compared to higher income group. This indicates the fact that higher education and higher family income do not necessarily lead higher participation of urban Bishnupriya Manipuri women in political campaigning. However, regarding the impact comparatively marital status, family background and occupation are more influential than other variables.

- ❖ **Contesting elections** – With regard to contesting elections, the study reveals that in rural areas all the socio-economic variables except family income are positively related. However, comparatively it is occupation of the women that greatly influence participation in contesting elections. Occupation-wise the socio-political activists show highest (92.3%) percentage of contesting elections, while students and government service holder show zero percent of involvement. Apart from occupation, family background and education also appear quite influential as substantial number of women (22.4%) from political families compared to non-political families (6.8%) stand to contest election. Similarly, it is the post-graduate who show highest participation (16.7%) while none of the illiterates contested for an election. Family income is inversely related to contesting elections as it is the lower income group who contested elections more than middle and higher income group though the difference is not very significant. On the contrary in urban areas participation in contesting elections is abysmally low and hardly any socio-political variable have a bearing on their participation. Participation is found nil among the young (18 – 30) and oldest respondents (61 & above); illiterate, primary educated, graduate and postgraduate; un-married and widow; political families; all occupational groups except home-makers; and middle income groups. This indicates that instead of socio-economic variables, the psychological variable as well as minority background of their community greatly influences the participation of urban women. It is found that majority of women in urban areas are not interested to contest election be it local, Assembly and parliamentary elections due to their minority status, lack of party support, domestic and other responsibilities etc.

- ❖ **Party membership** – In case of party membership, the study reveals that in rural and urban areas except family income all other variables are positively related. However, compared to other variables, occupation appears to be more influential. In rural areas it is the socio-political activists who show highest percentage of party enrolment i.e. (84.6%) while none of the student is interested to take party membership. Similarly in urban areas the percentage of taking party membership is highest (50%) among the socio-political activists, while none of the students and non-workers is interested to take party membership. However, apart from occupation, family background also exerts a considerable influence as compared to non-political families (8.6%), a sizeable percentage of women from political families (26.5%) have taken membership of different political parties. On the contrary, in urban areas apart from occupation, marital status appears influential as compared to married (7.5%) none of the widow and un-married women is inclined to take party membership. In both rural and urban areas family income is inversely related as compared to higher and middle income group, party membership is higher among the lower income group though the difference is not significant.
- ❖ **Membership in pressure groups** – Regarding pressure group activities, the study reveals that in rural areas except education and family income all other variables are quite influential on the participation of women. Pressure group membership is found higher among the age group of 41 – 50 (54.8%) followed by 31 – 40 (48.6%); matriculates (50%); married (48.6%); joint families (42.6%); political families (49%); socio-political activists (69.2%) followed by business women (47.4%) and home makers (42.5%). So far as family income is concerned an inverse relation is found as group membership is highest (54.2%) among the lower income group (1 – 36,000/). It reveals that higher family income does not necessarily result in higher participation of rural women in pressure group activities. In urban areas group membership is found higher among the age group of 52 – 60 (72.2%) followed by 41 – 50 (42.6%); primary (54.5%) and high school educated (52.8%); married (43.3%) followed by widow (40.7%); joint families (43.3%); political families (52%); socio-political activists (100%) followed by business group (62.5%) and home makers (45.5%); and higher income respondents (42.5%). Thus, in urban areas except (45.5%); and higher income respondents (42.5%). Thus, in urban areas except

education all other socio-economic variables exert great influence on the participation of women in pressure group activities. Though education is positively related as educated women participate more than the illiterates in both rural and urban areas but at the same time participation of highly educated women i.e. graduates and post-graduates is less. Thus, higher education does not necessarily result in greater participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in pressure group activities.

- ❖ **Un-conventional political activities** – In respect of un-conventional political activities, it is found that all the socio-economic variables are positively related to the participation of both rural and urban women. In rural areas considerable number of women belonging to the age group of 41 – 50 (30.6%); post-graduates (33.3%); married (23.7%); joint families (23%); political families (30%); socio-political activists (76.9%); and higher income group (22%) are found to have participated in various un-conventional political activities. So far as the impact of these variables is concerned comparatively occupation, age and family background appear more influential. In case of urban areas participation is found higher among the age group of 31 – 40 (35%); higher secondary educated (34.4%) and post-graduates (33.3%); married (26.6%); joint families (28.3%); political families (40%); socio-political activists (100%); and higher income groups (28.3%. Thus, in urban areas the extent to which education, family background and occupation influences, the other variables do not influence the participation of women.
- ❖ **Making political contacts** – In case of making political contacts either individually or through group; it is found that except family income all other socio-economic variables are positively related to the participation of both rural and urban women. The study reveals that in rural areas a sizeable number of women belonging to the age group of 41 – 50 (27.4%); graduates (25%); married (20.3%); joint families (20.9%); political families (30.6%); socio-political activists (100%); and middle income group Rs. 36,001 – 1,00000/ (21.9%) have participated in individual or group contacting activity. Though education shows a positive relation with this mode as the percentage of graduates stands highest but at the same time participation of highly educated

i.e. post-graduates is found less i.e. (16.7%). In case of urban areas proportion of participation is found higher among the women belonging to age group of 61 & above (29.2%); post-graduates and matriculates (25%); widow (29.6%); joint families (28%); socio-political activists (100%); and middle income group (22.5%). The participation of women from political and non-political families is almost same i.e. 20%. Thus, in both rural and urban areas compared to other variables, occupation appears to be a significant variable that exert great influence on the participation of women. However, in rural areas apart from occupation family background is also quite influential and the extent to which it influences the rural women it does not influence their counterparts in urban areas where participation from both political and non-political families is same. In both rural and urban areas family income is inversely related to this mode as the study reveals that it is middle income group who participated more than the higher income group. Thus, higher income does not necessarily lead to the higher participation of women in this act.

- ❖ **Political discussion** – With regard to political discussion the study reveals that in rural areas participation is higher among the women belonging to the age group of 41 – 50 (50%); graduates and post-graduates i.e. 50%; married (41.8%); joint families (41.2%); political families (53.1%); socio-political workers (92.3%) followed by business group (52.6%) and government servants (50%); and middle income group Rs. 36,001 – 1,00000/ (47.9%). Thus, in rural areas except family income all other variables are positively related. However, comparatively it is age, education, family background and occupation that appear more influential than marital status and structure of the family. Besides, higher family income does not necessarily leads to higher participation in political discussion as compared to higher income group it is the middle income group who participated more. In urban areas participation is highest among the women belonging to the age group of 41 – 50 (59.6%) followed by oldest i.e. 61 & above (50%); graduates (64.7%); widow 55.6%; joint families (65%); political families (68%); all occupations except students and home makers; and higher and middle income groups i.e. 47%. Thus, marital status and family income do not influence to the extent as other variables do.

➤ **Political awareness and attitudes of Bishnupriya Manipuri women towards politics and decision making:**

In respect of political awareness of Bishnupriya Manipuri women, the study reveals that compared to urban, political awareness among rural women is low. More than half of the respondents i.e. 52.4% in rural areas as against 38% in urban areas show lower level of political awareness. While, only 17% women in rural areas as against 37% in urban is highly aware about political issues and leadership. This may be explained by the fact that compared to rural, urban women are politically more informed due to their exposure to mass media and urban setting. In case of rural areas often women do not get proper political information as they are settled in remote villages where the communication is not good and also there is less media coverage. Notwithstanding this, majority of rural women are found not interested in political news and information as a result political awareness among them remains low.

Regarding the attitudes towards participation of women in decision making, the study reveals that though majority of women with little variation in rural and urban areas (64.6% and 72.3% respectively) mentioned that women should enjoy equal rights and freedom to take decisions at par with men at the family and society level. Nevertheless, when it comes to the practical enjoyment of freedom of decision making, 40.2% of women in rural as against 59.8% in urban areas have enjoyed freedom of decision making. Thus, comparatively urban women are more independent to take their decisions than their counterparts in rural areas. This may be due to the fact that urban women are more aware about their rights and freedom due to their urban setting as well as exposure to mass media.

So far as the attitudes of women towards participation and role in politics no significant difference is observed between rural and urban women. The study reveals that an overwhelming majority of women from both rural and urban areas (88.6% and 92.2% respectively) mentioned that women's role is not confined to domestic sphere only i.e. bearing and rearing children and to undertake household and family responsibilities. Instead women are capable to play a significant role in every other field including politics equally with men through their active participation. Thus, both rural and urban women equally do not agree with the traditional notion that politics is exclusively the domain of men. However, at the same time it is true that compared to

men, women by virtue of being women have to face multidimensional problems such as biological, socio-cultural, patriarchal and gender based that create hindrance towards their active participation in politics. Majority of women with little variation i.e. 59.8% and 63% in rural and urban areas respectively has strongly highlighted the above point. Thus, though women in both rural and urban areas think as well as support the activist role of women in politics equally with men but in practice majority show lack of interest to perform such role due to the burden of domestic responsibilities and social norms and values. Therefore, to perform an activist role in politics women must have to overcome all these hurdles for which they must possess interest as well as strong determination. Besides, there is a need to replace the patriarchal and other traditional as well as cultural value system that is based on inequality of sexes and prejudicial to women creating hindrance on their active participation in politics. Above all women themselves must have to realize their own subordinate status in politics and must possess the courage to break long established customary roles that act as glass ceilings towards their active participation.

Another important fact is that Bishnupriya Manipuri society is still patriarchal in nature. As such domestic and family responsibilities are considered primary and full time jobs for women. In fact women themselves have internalized this ideology and role which may be due to the socialization in value system that is oriented towards patriarchal system. Therefore, when it comes to the participation in active politics, majority of women in both rural and urban areas i.e. 66.1% and 71.4% respectively consider that participation in political activities except voting is a barrier in fulfilling domestic responsibilities. Since political activities are very complex and multifaceted that requires enough time and energy, as such women need to be highly active and mobile and must be prepared to step outside home whenever required. But the problem arises when they are unable to combine politics with their domestic responsibilities which are considered primary for them. In this kind of tussle, majority of women in rural and urban would regard participation in political affairs as barrier in performing their domestic responsibilities. Notwithstanding this, with the cooperation and support from other family members including males, women can overcome this problem and can actively participate in politics. Thus, though Bishnupriya Manipuri women think that women should participate in politics equally with men, they still consider it as secondary and as such by giving precedence to domestic and family responsibilities

majority of Bishnupriya women in both rural and urban areas are not interested to participate in active politics.

➤ **Political participation vis-à-vis self-assertion and empowerment of women:**

Regarding political participation vis-à-vis self-assertion and empowerment of women, the study reveals that an overwhelming majority of women in both rural and urban areas i.e. 86% and 85.9% respectively mentioned that participation in active politics is necessary for the empowerment of women to assert their position in the family and societal level. Similarly, majority of women who have so far contested for an election are of the opinion that their participation brought some positive changes in their lives at the family and society level. However, regarding political participation vis-à-vis self-assertion and political empowerment of Bishnupriya women, some important phenomena have been observed in the study. Though participation in active politics helps in the empowerment of women, at the same time it is also true that such participation not always result empowerment of women in an equal measure. In other words, after becoming political representatives women definitely find some positive changes such as getting more respect and recognition from the family and society, but in case of participation in decision making at the family and societal levels most of them still lag behind. Particularly in case of women who are new in politics and contested election for the first time, it is observed that they are not independent to take decision rather under the domination of their male family members like husband, son etc. who take decision and perform all political activities on their behalf. Such representatives are not conscious and assertive of their political rights and responsibilities and often remain aloof from public. They lack self-confidence and courage to perform their political duties and remain just figure heads. This kind of dummy leadership has adversely affected the actual political empowerment of women.

Notwithstanding this, it is observed that some women representatives (15%) who are experienced and active in politics for several years are undoubtedly empowered and independent. They are not only conscious about their rights and political duties but also confident to take any decision. This is due to their long political experience which made them assertive and self-confident as well as empowered. Therefore, the fact is that women who are new in the field of politics naturally lack experience as well as self-confidence; hence need time as well as assistance and advice

from other experienced persons to perform their political duties efficiently. Gradually with the passage of time these women gain experience in political field and could enjoy real political empowerment. Thus, so far as self-assertion and empowerment of women is concerned it can be stated that political participation definitely helps women provided they need time and political experience as well as an environment free from male domination and proxy culture.

➤ **Impact of Reservation policy:**

The reservation policy is undoubtedly a revolutionary landmark in the political representation and empowerment of women. Particularly, the positive impact of reservation policy on the women belonging to an economically backward as well as linguistic minority community such as Bishnupriya Manipuri community cannot be denied. Due to reservation policy many Bishnupriya Manipuri women are coming in the lime light of local level politics and showing their caliber at least in the areas where their population is numerous. In fact in rural areas a sizeable number of women are able to contest elections at the Panchayat level due to reservation policy. However, unlike rural areas (46.2%), reservation policy does not help much to the urban women as only a minuscule percentage (14.3%) contested election due to reservation policy. Though the percentage of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in contesting elections at the local level is very insignificant in urban areas but at least due to the reservation policy (73rd and 74th Amendment Acts) few women are able to contest elections, whereas it is none at the state and national level elections where there is no reservation for women.

Nevertheless, there is other side of reservation policy as it is observed that many women emerge nominal political leaders and their political empowerment remains intangible. Due to reservation policy though women for the first time gets the opportunity to contest elections and come to the limelight of politics but very few could enjoy the actual benefit of political empowerment. In other words many women are emerging as figure heads that can be counted but could not independent to exercise their political power and take political decisions. Most of such nominal representatives instead of doing their political duties, are found busy in doing their culture bound domestic and gender based duties such as bearing and rearing of their children and taking care of family. As nominal representatives their duty is only to put the signature and attend meeting whenever and wherever necessary that is too under the instruction

of their male members of the family. Even if few of them show their interest to attend a scheduled public meeting they are not allowed by the males who act as proxy leaders. These kinds of dummy political representation hold back the actual process of political empowerment and development of women. During the survey it is observed that some of the political representatives are not confident and independent enough to express their opinion without the assistance of their husbands.

- ❖ One such respondent is *Sajala singha*, who had contested as well as won the Panchayat level election under the banner of a political party in Nimaichandpur Gaon Panchayat of Hailakandi district. Surprisingly she neither knows the name of the party nor the information that she is a member of that party. The fact is that it is her husband (who supposed to contest the election but could not as the seat was reserved for women) enrolled her name in the party just for contesting the election. Thus she filed the nomination as candidate not out of her own interest but due to the pressure of her husband to fulfill the reserved quota for women. As a result though she is elected as a member Gaon Panchayat and now holding the post of Vice President, she is found totally unaware about her political responsibilities. It is her husband who is doing all the political works on her behalf. The opinion of her husband is that she does not know anything about politics so it of no use to take her interview, rather whatever political information required it should be collected from him.

There are number of examples of such nominal women representatives who emerge over the years. This indicate the harsh reality that though government has implemented political reservation for women but even after two decades there are many such women who are still not politically empowered in the strict sense of the term. This is due to their lack of political interest and dependency nature on the one hand and male domination and deep rooted patriarchal nature of the society on the other. Notwithstanding this, it is also true that experience makes a person self-confident and gradually a qualitative improvement could be noticed in the process of political empowerment of women though the process is rather gradual and not dramatic. It is observed in the survey that women who are experienced and become active in politics for several years are more empowered and independent no matter whether their education is high or low. Such women gradually leave their dependency nature and become more confident to take political decisions.

One such political representative (*Tezimala singha*) stated,

Women who are first timers in politics naturally lack experience as well as confidence hence need the supervision and guidance from other members or experienced persons. But it does not mean that the males should usurp their political power in the name of helping them. On the other hand women themselves too should not give up all their political duties on males on the ground of being new comer and less experienced. Rather once they come in the field of politics as political representatives it is their fundamental duty to develop political interest and gain experience gradually by knowing about their political powers and functions by going to office regularly, conducting as well as attending public meetings, making regular communication with the people and knowing their problems as well as proper solutions. Moreover, women should not terminate their political career after the completion of their first term instead must continue it. Then only they can develop self confidence as well as gain experience in political field and thus could enjoy real political empowerment. Otherwise they will never enjoy the actual benefit of reservation policy rather the dummy political culture or “proxy culture” will continue.

➤ **Problems and challenges of political participation:**

Political participation is a very complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The study reveals that except voting, the overall participation of rural and urban Bishnupriya Manipuri women in other modes of political activities is not praiseworthy. Particularly it is very negligible in case of contesting elections and taking party membership. During the course of study it is observed that majority of the respondents who have so far contested for an election or involve in party works had to face multidimensional problems. In comparison to men, women by virtue of being women, not only have to face biological constraints such as child birth as well as other health issues, but also are overburdened with various socio-cultural, gender based as well as domestic and family responsibilities which hinder their active participation in politics. Moreover, women unlike men often need to prove their competence to society when they become active in politics which adversely affect their self confidence. Not only that after winning election most of the women representatives often had to face gender discrimination as well as excessive interference and domination from the higher authorities particularly males while exercising their political power and making political decisions. Thus, they are not independent to exercise political power due to too much male interference and domination both at the family as well as political level.

Thus, along with the domestic and gender-based roles, there are divergent factors such as socio-economic as well as psychological in nature that create hindrances on the way of political participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women. Some of such factors are lack of interest, lack of time, lack of political awareness and information, lack of self confidence, lack of political opportunity, lack of political party support, lack of financial autonomy, level of education, old age and other health and security issues etc. Besides, status of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community as linguistic minority as well as patriarchal nature of the society not only put challenges but also to a great extent responsible for the lower participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in active politics.

➤ *Suggestions for the improvement of Bishnupriya Manipuri women's participation and role in politics:*

The low level of participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in politics and key decision making bodies not only results in women's agenda not getting properly reflected and addressed in public policies and programs but also affected their development adversely. Therefore, to increase the participation and representation of women and to improve their role in politics some measures and reforms need to be taken both at the government as well as societal or community level.

- ❖ Development of political interest among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women is the need of the hour to increase their participation and role in politics. In this regard the role of family is crucial. The process of interest generation through gender sensitization must begin in the family itself where interest of women should not be confined to gender based and other domestic works rather they must be encouraged and enjoy the freedom of choice to opt any career or occupation including politics. Thus, if women from the very childhood would be socialize and brought up in such an environment conducive to politics then they will definitely develop interest and favorable attitudes towards politics which will ultimately bring greater participation of these women in future.
- ❖ The Bishnupriya Manipuri community must learn lessons from past where in spite of being a linguistic minority community, it could emerge as a cohesive group and was successful in getting political representation at the state level by

electing Member of Legislative Assambly (MLA) from their own community for many times along with the support from other castes and communities (such as Sri Nanda Kishore Sinha was elected three times i.e. twice from Sonai constituency in 1952 & 1957 and thereafter in 1962 from Silchar constituency, Sri Pulakeshi Singha from sonai constituency in 1962 and Sri Kartik Sena Sinha from Patherkandi constituency in 2006). However, still now no Bishnupriya Manipuri woman is elected as MLA in south Assam. Therefore, if the people of this community really committed for the political representation and empowerment of women, then they must not indulge in groupism rather must be united and work in this direction so that they can get the support from other castes and communities. Moreover, the local leaders both men and women who hold important portfolios within this community must not engage in power struggle rather forgo their self interest and play active role in this regard for the greater interest of the community. Otherwise whatever the facilities provided by the government would not bring the desired result and the community will suffer.

- ❖ Various social and women organization in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community such as Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Mahasabha, Sahitya Sabha, Nikhil Bishnupriya Manipuri Women Organization, Amugmanjuri Social Organization for Women, Makhail social organization, Pakaipar Mahila Samiti, Nayagram Women Development Society and many more require to play activist role in this regard. They must realize political condition of their women and undertake regular awareness programmes, meetings, political camps in both rural and urban areas to generate political interest as well as self-confidence among women. These organizations must take concrete agenda to aware women as well as society about the adverse impact of political isolation and lower political representation of women and must encourage them to participate in active politics. Besides, those who are socio-political activists must undertake the responsibility to encourage as well as help women to develop their inner potentiality to come forward and play significant role in politics.
- ❖ There is a need to change patriarchal mentality of men, women and society together in order bring greater participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women.

The process of such change must begin from women themselves as often it is women who perpetuate the patriarchal value system in an equal measure. Women themselves have to realize their own subordinate status and must develop the courage to break long established customary and gender based roles and other traditional as well as cultural values that are not only prejudicial to them but also act as glass ceilings on their way of political participation and empowerment. Moreover, women must have empathy to other women and should encourage and support them to perform their political roles and responsibilities without any fear, hesitation and dependency. Besides, to facilitate greater participation by women it is equally important that the males must forgo their male chauvinism and encourage and co-operate women by sharing the burden of domestic responsibilities. While, the society instead of making discrimination must acknowledge the leadership qualities of women and must encourage women through its various social organizations to play active role in politics.

- ❖ It is highly required that there must be re-orientation of political parties so far as participation of women is concerned. The political parties should not play vote bank as well as gender based politics at least when it comes to the political representation and empowerment of women belonging to a backward and linguistic minority community. Particularly in the urban areas, political parties should give up their apathetic attitude towards Bishnupriya Manipuri community and must show true democratic spirit by accepting the political space of women and allotting tickets to these women. The Bishnupriya Manipuri women also instead of blaming parties must take step by raising their voice whenever they face any such discrimination at the time of selection of candidates for election and in providing important offices in party hierarchies and other decision making bodies.

Political participation is no doubt an important indicator of women's empowerment. A strong and successful democracy is one where citizens irrespective of their gender are not passive rather actively shape politics through their increase participation in decision-making process. Thus, *Participatory theory of democracy* assumes greater significance than the *Democratic Realism*. *The participatory theory* not

only emphasizes broader participation but also strives to create opportunities for all to make meaningful contributions to decision making in the operation of a political system. Regarding the issue of what leads people to participate, the study reveals that participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women is not always guided by educative values. Rather, instrumental, expressive and communitarian values of participatory politics have its own importance. The study reveals that the extent of political participation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in rural and urban areas of south Assam is not confined to voting only. In fact they participate in different modes of conventional and un-conventions political activities. However, the nature of their participation is not homogeneous as participation is very high in voting in both rural and urban areas but in case of other modes of political activities participation is found low. Apart from voting, a considerable number of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in rural and urban areas participate in political campaigning, pressure group activities, political discussions, unconventional political activities, and making political contacts. However, their participation is very negligible in party membership and contesting elections in both rural and urban areas. So far as the extent of participation is concerned, the study reveals that comparatively rural women participate more in voting, political campaigning, pressure group as well as party activities and contesting elections. On the contrary, participation of urban women is higher in political discussions, un-conventional political activities, making political contacts. Nevertheless, except political campaigning, no significant difference is found between rural and urban women in their extent of participation. In spite of comparatively higher level of political awareness and greater exposure to mass media than the rural women, participation of urban women is abysmally low particularly in contesting elections and party membership. The main reason is their lack of interest. Except voting, the urban Bishnupriya Manipuri women are found apathetic and cynic towards active politics. Besides, compared to rural, population of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in urban centers is very less and as such many of them are not interested to stand for an election because in the midst of vote bank politics the possibility of winning the election is very less. While, political parties are least interested to motivate and provide tickets as well as higher position to these women in the party; the local leaders of this ethnic community are also not that active and serious to motivate urban women to participate.

The proportionate participation and inclusion of women in the power structure and key decision-making bodies not only bring gender issues to the forefront but also leads to women's empowerment and advancement in society. The study reveals that political representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women is not only low but it is limited to local level politics only. Compared to rural it is even lower in urban areas. In fact there is no women political representative from this community at the state and national legislatures. This lack of representation of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in the mainstream politics and key decision making bodies is indeed a great concern for the people of this community. This is so because, due to their non-representation different issues and problems of this community in general and women in particular are not getting properly reflected and addressed in public policies and programs at the state and national level which adversely affects their development. While the socio-economic variables have a great bearing on the nature and extent of their participation, the other factors i.e. psychological, gender based and minority background of the community cannot be underestimated. In fact, belonging to a linguistic minority community, Bishnupriya Manipuri women are double marginalized – one at the community level because they are not the dominant group. The other at the gender level as they are not at par with men rather occupies a secondary status in society. In other words, living in an economically backward and patriarchal society, Bishnupriya Manipuri women have not received the actual support system from the family, civil society and the state. Thus, until and unless structures like patriarchy, vote bank politics and gender discrimination will not vanish, the road towards political participation and empowerment of Bishnupriya Manipuri women is very complex. Therefore, the above suggestions and recommendation in respect of political participation and empowerment of Bishnupriya Manipuri women in rural and urban areas of south Assam need to be addressed and implemented properly. Above all Bishnupriya Manipuri women must develop a favorable attitude and interest towards politics and must have the desire to bring a change in their subordinate status by actively participating in politics or else decision to empower them from above will not bear fruit and they will remain marginalized in politics.
