

CHAPTER- 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the present research an attempt has been made to study the empowerment of women through the participation in grassroots politics. Therefore we have made an intensive empirical investigation of the socio-economic background of the women representatives of PRIs and their participation in the Panchayat activities and their role performance to implement the developmental policies and schemes. We have drawn the sample of a sufficiently representative nature with a logically tenable intensity of generalization. The study is largely sociological in nature and we have basically generated primary data in the research for analysis. The study has tried to fill the gap of our understanding of an important subject directly relevant to Political Science, Political Sociology and Social Anthropology. Our study is a humble attempt to examine the recommendations of different committees, legislations and constitutional amendments since the time of independence with regards to participation of women in PRIs and the role of Assam Government in this regard. An attempt has been made to understand the socio-economic and political background and characteristics of women representatives and to scrutinize whether the socio-economic determinants could bear some impacts on the emerging women leadership particularly aftermath of the 73rd CA Act. We also made an attempt to examine the role performance and the constraints of political participation of the women

representatives. Observing all these points we have taken up an empirical study on women representatives with special reference to the women representatives of Panchayats under Nalbari district elected in 2001.

Prior to going into our research problem we have laid down a very brief profile of the Nalbari district location which is our empirical setting that we have selected for investigations. The present Nalbari district was the part of the Kamrup Kingdom. It was also the part of the Kamrup district and it was one of the subdivisions of Kamrup district till 15 August, 1985, when it was declared as a district with headquarter at Nalbari Town. We find that Nalbari district, though the centre-stage of modern Assam culture, politics, civilization, and of major societal discourse, it remains backward along with other district areas of the state, highly populated and uneven in content and social composition. We also find that Nalbari had a great role in the freedom movement of India and in different popular movements and uprising organized for some regional issues after independence. Except the freedom movement and all other movements and uprisings, the women of the Nalbari district have played very active and significant role. However, their participation in direct politics or electoral politics has not been satisfactory. In the PRI politics also their participation as representatives was almost insignificant up to 2001, in which year the first election for PRIs according to the new Panchayat act was held. The 73rd Amendment in 1992 was an institutional change, which envisaged 33 percent reservation of seats for rural women in PRIs. It has brought more than 33 percent women to the decision making process from the miniscule of 2 to 4 percent earlier in the Nalbari district. While analyzing the politico-historical reality and role of women in politics of Nalbari district

in general and in grassroots politics in particular we have conformed to our first hypothesis that most of the women representatives of the PRIs are elected from the reserved seats provided for by the new dispensation, and the Panchayats are fairly represented by women in Assam according to the statutory norm prescribed by the 73rd CA Act 1992. Thus at the first instance, we have drawn an inference that political decentralization to the grassroots with reservation of seats for women has been effective as women have been adequately elected to the PRIs for decision making, which is a landmark in the history of evolution of democracy in India as well as in the political empowerment in India. With such a large number of women in the political scenario for the first time, a study of their social and economic profile, political interest, aspirations and awareness, and the factor determining their participation in grassroots politics..

In Assam there was no historical evidence of Panchayat in ancient period. There was certain local institution in the medieval period which was known as '*Khel*', '*Mel*' etc. which functioned as the village organization for settling their local disputes, for the collaboration of social or religious functions and for other welfare activities of the villages. However, these institutions were not like Panchayats in other parts of India. In the initial period of British rule, Assam Panchayats were constituted by the British rules with different meaning and purpose. The Panchayats were not constituted by the village elders to solve the local problems. It was mainly constituted for judicial purpose to decide major case on behalf of the British administration. In Assam the constitution of Panchayat was initiated by village Choukidar Act, 1870. Further during the British rule another Act on local self-government

was passed by the British rulers in 1915. After independence the first Panchayat act was enacted in Assam in 1959 as per the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report. Thereafter, Assam Panchayat Raj Act, 1972 and The Assam Panchayat Act 1986 were enacted respectively before the 73rd CA Act. It is worth mentioning here that for the first time the Assam Panchayat Act 1986 had provided twenty five percent reservations to women in Assam at a time when there was no provision of reservation for women in PRIs in other parts of India. In 1994 a new Panchayat act was passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly according to the provisions of the 73rd CA Act. However, its execution began since 2001 by the first Panchayat election being held as per the new act in December 2001. Since then the new experimentation of grassroots governance in the state has been going on with statutorily recognized women reservation and resultant participation of women to the desired extent and it becomes a grassroots governance movement for the women milieu in Assam like other states to make the prevalent functional democratic decentralization more effective than before, where women could raise their voices heard in the decision making process.

We have examined the socio-economic and political background of the women representatives of PRIs by analyzing the variables such as age, sex, caste, community, religion, education, occupation, land holding pattern, income, political affiliation etc.

Examining the feature of age, we have found that majority of the elected women representatives of PRIs are young and middle age group. Thus, we have drawn an inference that Assam evinces relatively greater interest to

grassroots politics in recent times than the old aged which may seem the increment of political consciousness among the younger women generation that induces political empowerment.

Our study of the marital status of the women representatives reveals that most of the women representatives are married. The number of unmarried women is microscopic. The reasons of dominance of married women in PRIs may be many such as the lower age of marriage and early takeover of family responsibility. The other reason may be the fear of character assassination and criticism by the opposition or anti social elements which may hamper their personal life etc. The final reason may be the relatively more interest in building up an academic career than a political career. In Assam as is observed, middle class families generally do not encourage the young unmarried girls to contest election rather than encourage their girl child to undertake studies. Meritorious middle class women would seek a bright academic career, rather than a clumsy political career, though they have got opportunity to seek berth in the PRIs through the new dispensation.

Examining the number of children of the respondents we have found that majority of them have not followed the family planning norm. Therefore, they have more than two children. Thus, it reveals that number of children is not a negative factor for joining politics for women in Assam. Regarding family structure, we have found that large majority of the women representatives prefer to live in small (nuclear) family and only a relatively small number used to live in joint families. However, our study reveals that though majority of the women are living separately with their husband and siblings from their husbands parental family, yet they did not sever ties

totally with them. From our study we can assume that nuclear family may be relatively more advantageous for women to freely come to rural politics than the joint family environment full of restraints and burden of household works.

In India caste plays a dominant role in the grassroots politics. Since the introduction of Panchayat Raj in 1956 the rural landlords, zamindars, money lenders and the high caste groups, dominated the PRIs and these groups together were called dominant caste, which controlled the rural power structure. Not only grassroots politics, but the high caste groups also dominate the state legislatures and the union parliaments. We find that majority of the representatives belong to general caste which also called higher caste. The influence of lower caste groups like OBC, SC and STs in rural politics is lesser than the high caste groups. Thus, we can draw an inference that women belonging to the high caste groups find necessary political exposures at the village and dominate the PRIs. The data reveal that majority of the women representatives are Hindus and Muslim women evince lesser interest in Assam PRI politics. Thus, we find that high caste Hindu women have dominated the grassroots politics in Assam.

Observing the educational background, we find that there are no illiterate women in the PRIs in Assam. Hence, we have drawn the inference that illiterate and lowly educated women have little or no confidence in playing a positive role in grassroots governance and comprehensively qualified women dominate the grassroots politics in Assam. Thus, the myth that Panchayats are the layman's politics and that educated women have no attraction to grassroots governance does not come true. Hence, we assume that the new dispensation of democratic decentralization has initiated a new revolution in

the field of women political empowerment in India, is qualified women have freely come to participate in PRI politics.

Observing the occupational status we find that a large majority of the women representatives are housewives which are not recognized as an occupation in India. Only a very microscopic number of unmarried respondents are engaging in some small occupations like labour, tailor, pan shop owner, home tutor etc. This is certainly a reflection of the economic dependence of women largely on men which may lead to curtailing their role in decision making. However, we observe that economic dependence does not deter in the way of their acquiring leadership position. Thus, we can infer that occupation has no direct relationship with the emerging leadership in the PRIs and this contention is supplemented by several studies. Additionally we find that women whose husbands and parents are government service holders are more attracted to PRI politics than women having other professions. By analyzing the annual income of family members, we find that lower middle class women have secured a berth in the grassroots politics in Assam. A large majority of women representatives are landless. They are not the direct possessors of any landed property which reflects the dominance of patriarchy in our society. Observing the family landed property position we infer that women representatives do not represent the landlord classes. Hence, though Assam women have participated in grassroots governance as voters, and as leaders, they are not economically empowered. Since, they are economically dependent on their fathers, elder brothers and husbands, their decision making capabilities in Panchayats might be decisively influenced by the male kins of the family. Hence, additionally an inference can be drawn

that though women are politically empowered, they are yet to be empowered economically and therefore political empowerment in India does not necessarily mean economic empowerment and empirical reality reveals that hard patriarchy comes in the way of economic empowerment of women in Assam. Therefore, we assume that economic decentralization without removing hard patriarchy would be a dust and tinsel.

However, our study establishes the fact that the myths associated with the entry of women into leadership position that would be hindered by socio-economic profile in terms of their age, caste, occupation family income, land holding and education are disproved. Field data have clearly substantiated that women would definitely fit into the hard patriarchal social framework. Thus, women of Assam have been socially and politically empowered through grassroots politics especially through the PRIs.

The political profile of the women representatives has been studied through the broad parameters such as political affiliation, involvement of the family members in political parties, linkages with voluntary organizations and political awareness etc.

Observing the data we find that large majority of the respondents are the first time entrants in PRIs as none of their family members formerly held any political position in the PRIs or in any other higher political bodies. Thus, we infer that a large majority of women representatives of PRIs are lacking in previous political experience. They are new entrants and hence we assume that the new dispensation has greatly attracted women to come to grassroots politics. We have drawn inference that previous political and representational experience is not necessary for women to become a leader

in the newly constituted PRIs. Hence, the post-decentralization scenario in Assam has amply revealed that democratic decentralization in terms of representation of women in the PRIs has been effective and this reflects political changes in the Assam villages.

In Assam the Panchayat election of 2001 was held on the basis of political party. At that time Cong (I) was the ruling party in Assam and it played a major role in that election by gaining majority of the seats in all the three tiers of Panchayats. We find that most of the women representatives were the primary members of different political parties and they were not holding any important portfolios in the party. We find that a whopping number of women representatives were affiliated to different political parties and they contested Panchayat election under the party banner. Only a small number of respondents contested Panchayat election as independent candidates. We find that a large number of women Panchayat representatives are belonged to Congress (I) while the number of women representatives elected under AGP and BJP party tickets is relatively small. While analyzing the party background of family members, we find that majority of the respondent's families have political party backing which provides inspirations to women to be involved in grassroots politics.

Along with the membership of political party the linkages of the women with other voluntary organization help them to achieve leadership position in PRIs. For women, the involvement of social organizations might have gained some competence, such as accounting, leading discussion, formulating their point of view etc. We find that a large majority were involved in activities of voluntary organizations prior to getting elected to the present portfolios.

Mainly they are involving with the *Mahila Samity* (women's Committee), Self Help Groups, *Local Sangha*, and NGO's etc. Thus, we can infer that the involvement of women with social organizations and institutions has played a role in the emergence of rural leadership in women especially through the PRIs.

We have studied political awareness through various attributes such as knowledge about the 73rd CA Act, and Assam Panchayat Act 1994 and the awareness about the women's quota introduced in the new act. We find that though a microscopic top brass women leaders are aware about PRI Acts, overpowering majority of the members exclusively lack in knowledge about the PRI acts. We have drawn inference that Assam women have very little or no awareness and knowledge about the vital political developments taking place in connection with grassroots democracy. This reflects less political consciousness among rural women in the state but it is also equally important that Assam rural women have come out freely to be participated as decision makers in grassroots bodies. In this context we can conform to our second hypothesis that most of the women representatives have limited knowledge about the new dispensation of 1992 and the Assam Panchayat Act of 1994. We also assume that though women are adequately elected to the PRIs, they are not informative to the desired extent and lack in necessary political consciousness.

We have extensively examined the participation of women as voters and contestant candidates in the election process of PRIs. While analyzing the causes for joining the PRIs, we find that women leaders are politically motivated and socialized as such by the leading political parties and inspired

largely to come to grassroots politics by the politically articulated neighborhood.

Additionally, we find that political parties have played a crucial role in grassroots politics after the new dispensation and they are largely successful in wooing, motivating and mobilizing the rural women to contest elections and joining in PRI politics. Analyzing political variables we have conformed to our fifth hypothesis that women representative of PRIs contest panchayats elections largely on the wishes of the male, neighborhood, relatives and the party to which they belong and they largely lack in gender sensitiveness. We have examined the electoral status and involvement of women in the electioneering process. Analyzing the variables, we find that political parties are not interested to nominate the women candidates to contest for the seats which are not reserved for women as well as women are also not interested to contest against male candidates. Thus, we conclude that women political aspirants are still captives under the veil of patriarchy even in the domain of reservation. But it is certainly impressive that almost all the women political aspirants at the grassroots level were elected by contesting against other candidates and undoubtedly this process has provided them political education and training. We find that barring a microscopic number of women contestants the whopping number openly and actively involved in the election campaign as the data reveal. Most of the time the male members dominate the activities like campaign during elections, because of some restrictions being traditionally imposed on women to go outside home during night and for other reasons. But empirical data reveal that a majority of women contestants including the elected representatives in Assam are active participants in the election process

which is really impressive in a male dominated society like ours. This is also reflective of political empowerment. We also find that women representatives have the ability to address the public meeting to convince and justified their stands as candidates and to make out and convey their own points before the voters during election campaigns.

Observing the election expenditure incurred by the representatives in the PRI elections, we find that though the election expenditures were reportedly not too much, the role of money cannot be denied in the outcome of elections to grassroots politics even in case of women contestants.

We have also studied the role performance of women representatives and problems they have been facing in this regard. We find that in Assam the women representatives of PRIs have sufficient time to participate in panchayat activities. Despite having regular household responsibilities women found adequate time to perform their usual duties as representatives. However, a considerable size of women leaders have household compulsion, preferred to perform household duties and then come to their political responsibilities, which certainly have a negative impact in the decision making process. We find that a large number of women representatives are active participants in all the panchayat meetings and in decision making as such that manifests their democratic consciousness. The data reveal that a large majority of women representatives not only regularly attending the meetings but they are also able to voice their opinion on different issues figured in regular Panchayat meeting agenda. But it is depressive that a large majority participates in meetings without any homework and as a result they become, most of the times, backbenchers in the PRI, without meaningful participation.

We also found that the points raised by women members get less importance most of the times and this once again reflects male dominance in the grassroots institutions despite their adequate representation. It has also been observed that majority of the women respondents do not raise strong protest against the refutation of their views raised in the PRI meetings. Hence, their indifference towards decision making ensures gain for the male which also supplements male dominance in an indirect manner. Even, as the data reveal male representatives are not satisfied with the participation of large number of women in the PRIs, that is once again a reflection of just a functional representation of women in the PRIs and not effective which may turn the system of reservation into a mockery. Our observation also highlights that most of the time women representatives have to borrow tips of representation from the males which also supplements male dominance in Assam Panchayats.

Examining participation of women respondents in rural developmental activities, we find that a large majority of women members are not involved with the activities of rural development and they have neither clear idea nor any experience about rural development and approved schemes. But as routine works, majority of the representatives have accomplished some important tasks to be performed during their tenure. Accordingly, they got opportunity to perform tasks including construction of roads, culverts, schools, *Namghar*, Mosque and IAY houses. But reportedly, women have to face hardship in performing their tasks mainly from the male counterparts. This once again reveals that women leaders are not free from male interference in carrying out developmental works and are yet to play meaningful role. We find that the women leaders of Assam are not very much conscious about the social

evils which the rural women have been suffering. Hence, we can once again conform to our fifth hypothesis that women leaders at the grassroots level in Assam are not considerably gender sensitive and they play rather a passive role in removing some formidable social evils that degenerate the status of rural women. But at the same time majority of women representatives, involve in organizing the rural women to take them out from the four walls of homes for participation in the meetings of *Gaon Sabha* and other meetings organized by PRIs. However, most of the women representatives have not taken up any measure to organize the rural women to fight against social evils like dowry, alcoholism, domestic violence etc.

While analyzing the participation of women in PRIs and role performance, we find that without reservation of seats for women, it is likely that only a few women would be present as elected members in the institutions of local governance. Thus, we once again conform to our first hypothesis that most of the women representatives of the PRIs are elected from the reserved seats provided for by the new dispensation and the panchayats are fairly represented by women. The findings we have found by analyzing different political variables clearly negate our third hypothesis that the women representation of PRIs have partially participated in the decision making process and in the planning and implementation of the developmental activities as most of the women leaders not only attending the meetings regularly, but also are able to voice their opinion on different issues, though most of the times, their voices are not properly heard.

We have made an extensive study on the perceptions of male representatives and the civil society on the women representatives for a broader

understanding of women's political participation at the grassroots level considering the fact that emerging women leaders should have a broad social support bases for making their roles more and more effective for rural reconstruction. Since, the induction of women into PRI politics a need has been felt to understand perception and perspectives of the male representatives and the wider civil society on the role of women leaders at the PRIs.

Prior to discussing the main theme we have studied first the socio-economic background of the male representatives. We find that majority of the male representatives are young and of middle age group. Observing caste factor, we find that the Assam PRIs are represented by males belonging to different caste groups. While the high caste groups find adequate representation, the SCs are overrepresented and the Muslims are also adequately represented in proportion to their population in Assam society. Majority of the male respondents belong to small family rather than the traditional joint family. Thus, additionally we infer that joint family has broken down and nuclear family has emerged which have a predominant impact on the composition of PRIs in Assam in recent times. We find that unmarried young people either have no interest in participating in the grassroots decision making process in Assam or they might be straightforward discouraged by the elders to enter into PRIs. Hence political parties at the grassroots level do not like to induct new blood in local bodies. Observing educational background, we find that lowly educated people dominate the PRIs and highly educated men do not come to leadership position at the grassroots level. Occupationally the PRIs are dominated by male cultivators, businessmen and other private job holders. Though majority of the male respondents

have attained occupations, their annual income is not high and the lower range of their annual income signify the lower middle class status. A large majority of the male representatives have landed property inherited from their father. Interestingly income from landed property was not disclosed. As the data reveal, none of our male representatives is outside the purview of party politics and a large majority are affiliated to the Congress (I) party. While examining the causes for joining the PRI politics we find that most of the male respondents come to PRI politics exclusively on motivation of political parties and due to their personal interest. Like the women, the men also lack in knowledge about the 73rd CA Act, but they have a little knowhow about the latest Assam Panchayat Act. Majority of the male representatives regularly participated in the PRI meetings and a large number have been able to voice their opinion strongly in the panchayat meetings held on different issues. We find that opinions expressed by males are usually accepted and established for actions. Their regular participation in all deliberations signifies upward trend in the growth of grassroots democracy in Assam. A large majority of male representatives have played a decisive role in settling village disputes and their leadership reportedly has commands in village affairs.

After discussing the social background features we have studied the male perception on women leadership at the grassroots politics. We find that though a small number of males opposed women reservation in grassroots governance, majority of the male representatives support women reservation arguing that the traditional open contest system does not ensure adequate number of women in panchayats, women should be brought to the position of power even by an effective reservation policy. The male view that, had the

new dispensation being not brought out women would not have got an opportunity otherwise to come to the position of power as of now. However, the male admit that they still have an upper hand in the decision making in the PRIs because of obvious inefficiency noticed in the working of women. The male alleged that women members either do not take active part in the decision making or their views have not been taken into consideration for a decision for most women seem unprepared to raise arguments in pertinent issues. They view that majority of women are passive participants who most of the time remain dumb and mute during the time of decision making. Thus, we have drawn inference that though women are politically empowered in the grassroots governance, in reality they are yet to enjoy the fruits of political empowerment and democratic decentralization. However, it seems that the male are mostly liberal towards women in the grassroots, extent help, offer tips and have given cooperation in performing their roles. Most of the male also expressed satisfaction at the average role performance of the women in the panchayats as the data reveal. But majority of the male members express that panchayats has largely failed to play a positive role to empower women to a desired extent. Here, we feel that the traditionally inherent and institutionalized structural constraints and functional deficiencies should be removed by enacting reforms and making some modifications to facilitate women to effectively take part in the decision-making.

We have also examined the reactions of some selected members of the civil society towards women leaders at the grassroots. Most of the civil society respondents firstly expressed negative view as to the working of the PRIs. We have capitulate the civil society view that reveals that PRIs are just

functioning as satellites of the metropolitan governing elites which dominate the whole affairs of grassroots governance with allocating little or no autonomy to the former. Thus, according to the civil society respondents though theoretically powers are democratically decentralized to the villages through the modified PRIs, in reality, they fail to fulfill the popular expectations of rural people of Assam. The civil society views that most PRI leaders are less politically conscious, socially irresponsible and they fail to carry out their duties to meet popular expectations. Some even view that the new PRI Act has created a local semi elite (small elite) class in rural Assam and the metropolitan governing and bureaucratic big elites dominate local governance almost absolutely with the help of their small elite brothers. However, the civil society respondents almost absolutely support and welcome reservation of seats for women in the PRIs. They express that political parties have extended full cooperation to women becoming grassroots leaders. Thus, in Assam, as the civil society observes, political parties play a dominant role for election of women to PRIs. But the civil society still is not satisfied at all in the role performance of women leaders. The civil society respondents observe that the women representatives know fewer things about panchayat administration, jurisdictions and functions. They are also less informative, less tactical and less conscious about their duties and responsibilities. At the same time people observe that a woman especially married women with child in arm cannot spare much time to panchayat activities due to their overburden household works. Women also play passive role in the works of rural development and indifferent towards implementing the developmental schemes. It seems thus, many a times women feel shyness, helpless and

hesitant to assert their rights and positions as leaders in the face of the dominant male counterparts. Thus we find that popular views are not yet positive and congenial about the role performance of women leaders in rural development and governance.

Now, by examining the role performance, political participation, nature of emerging women leadership, socio-economic background features of women, and their family members, perceptions of male representatives and the civil society on women leadership we find that though women are not fully successful in playing their role as development participants in the PRIs, their participation and spirit of involvement in grassroots governance is highly impressive. Therefore, our statement that we have made in our sixth and last hypothesis that women still do not evince political consciousness and largely fail to assert their socio-economic and political rights and position has come to be partially true. This hypothesis has not been fully conformed as large number of women contestants fully participate in grassroots governance which reflects democratic and political consciousness. But it is true that they are still not successful in asserting their rights and ensuring their position in the domain of grassroots governance because of obvious structural constraints.

We find that political decentralization to the grassroots governance with reservation of seats for women has been fully effective as adequate number of women have been elected to the PRIs which is in fact a landmark in the history of evolution of decentralized democracy in India. But we also find that though women are politically empowered at the grassroots rural governance, they are not economically empowered. Empirical reality reveals

that hard patriarchy persisting in our society has hindered in the economic empowerment of women and this can only be realized by making the existing patriarchy flexible. We also find that elected women are less informative and they largely lack in necessary political consciousness. Women representatives are regularly attending the meetings, and are also able to voice their opinion on various issues, but they largely fail to influence the males as well as to transform their arguments into decision-making because of male dominance. Moreover, post – decentralization scenario in Assam has amply revealed that reservation of women to the grassroots political institutions, the PRIs, has brought about a new revolution of women political empowerment in India that reflects drastic political changes in the rural societies of the country.

Thus, we conclude by saying that though women are socially and politically empowered through the Panchayati Raj Institutions, they are yet to be empowered economically. The economic background features and their role in economic transformation of the village people, as well as their weak standing in the economic decision-making process at the PRI level clearly reflect their economically weak and insignificant position in village societies and the grassroots political apparatus. Hence, the mission and objectives of democratic decentralization and empowerment of women through the grassroots governance at the village level by the new dispensation aftermath of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1992 have not been fully realized.

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