



# STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NAGALAND

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## Abstract

The democratic values and principles introduced by the Constitution of India has opened up the doors for the women of the country to find their equal place in the political administration of the country and in their respective state and local areas. However, due to various socio-cultural and patriarchal values and practices have restricted women to hold equal place in the decision making bodies at all levels of governance. Though the Constitution of Indian democracy provide equal political rights to both men and women, but at all level to exercise the equal political rights of women has been ignored and suppressed by socio-cultural factors. Within India the degree of political participation of women vary across states, due to different attitude and behavior towards women in a particular society and the organizational norms and values that characterize it. Drawing on the experience of political participation of women in Nagaland, which is invariably held as an example of gender inequality and invisibility of women in political arena, the paper focuses on various issues and challenges of women's exclusion the political participation in local governance, thereby inhabiting their further participation and visibility. The paper shows how the socio-cultural practices and customary laws govern the attitude of people that tend to exclude women to hold political power. Secondly the paper also point out that how customary law safeguarded by the Article 371A of the Indian Constitution, which became the basis for the enactment of the Nagaland Village Council Act,

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1978, put restrictions on women to participate in local government both at urban and local level. The paper concludes that reforms on local governance on gender inclusive approach in Nagaland can enable and enhance women's political representation and involvement in public life.

***Index Terms:* Electoral Politics, Local Governance, Law and Policies, Naga Women, Political Participation**

## **Introduction**

Political participation of women is essential to ensure that woman's concerns and issues are integrated into the mainstream of decision making process. Democratic politics is not meaningful unless it provides equal opportunities to women at par with men in all walks of life. For the equal participation of women in democratic politics the constitution of India guarantees equal status and rights along with men in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles. Through the various constitutional steps, and programmes and policies of the government of India, women have been empowered to achieve equal role with her male counterpart in social, economic and political spheres. But an important arena where women have been inadequately represented is the political arena. The socio-cultural factors like traditional gender roles, traditional prejudices, economic dependence and unfavorable political opportunity has contributed much towards women's formal political (in)equality and their meaningful exercise of political power.

S.K. Dash (2012) argues that rapid progress in the fields of education, communication industrialization and urbanization has positive impact on the status of women in India. The one-third reservation of seats in both urban and rural local government has been enabled women in other parts of India to come to the forefront and actively engage in local decision- making bodies. "The traditional belief that men make better leaders than women shows a substantial generational decline in postindustrial societies, with younger postwar generations far more egalitarian than their parents and grand parents. "(Norris and Ronald, 2001:136). In case of India, the changing perception towards women political leaders is visible from the first Lok Sabha Election there were 22 women (4.4 percent) elected to the first parliament where as in the 17th Lok Sabha election with record of 78 women (14 percent) in Lok Sabha is the highest number of women parliamentarians since 1952. A total of 724 women candidates contested in the 17th Lok Sabha Election, from across the country is an example of positive attitude of people towards women's political leadership as well as women's increasing interest in the field. Although women, to a great extent succeeded in gaining acceptance and recognition, but their representation is quite disproportionate to their population. However, in India political participation of women varies from state to state due diversity of social and cultural system. In this context the paper focuses on the issues and barriers of political participation of women in Nagaland, where the presence of women in state politics is completely invisible and marginal in local government.

## Electoral politics and political participation of Naga women

Formation of Nagaland statehood in the year 1963 has equally fostered the growth of diverse new democratic spaces for participation in governance. This meant democratic principles of freedom and political equality not only gave citizens them a new experience but also led them to a new world of opportunity, i.e, democratic participation and representation at all levels of the political process of the state. But at all level to exercise the equal political rights of women has been ignored and suppressed by socio-cultural factors, gender insensitive legal system, patriarchal values, rigid customary law, and pessimistic attitude and behavior towards women's place in the political sphere.

It is true that because of their better educational opportunity, the women in Naga society have proportionately progressed in claiming major share in academics and intellectual pursuits, even they have made gate-crash entry into professional, trade and commerce which was earlier monopolized by men but the presence of women in state politics is completely 'missing' in the arena of holding power. Though the educated Naga women have higher aspirations in favour of gender equality and aware about their rightful place in the society in different aspects, it is the socio- cultural practices which have restricted them so far. The customary laws of Nagas "prohibit women from participating in the decision-making body and considering this traditional law and customary practices, men in general and majority of women in particular are not willing to acknowledge any Naga woman politician as an 'able and efficient leader' " (Niumai, 2015: 355). Such practice is exacerbated by the patriarchal system which is reflected in the argument that "the unequal status and position of women in Naga traditional society is nothing but a natural corollary of the patriarchal system and values upon which our society, irrespective of tribe, is founded" (Changkija, 2014:77). The election record of Nagaland state assembly elections beginning in the First General Elections of 1964 clearly depicts the monopoly of men in political arena:-

**Table-1: Number of persons contested and elected by sex in various General Elections to State Legislative Assembly in Nagaland from 1964 to 2018**

General Election	Year	Total No. of seats	No. of contestants		Female		Male	
			Female	Male	No. of elected	% of winning to total seat	No. of elected	% of winning to total seats
1st	1964	40	0	73	0	0	40	100
2nd	1969	40	2	142	0	0	40	100
3rd	1974	60	0	219	0	0	60	100
4th	1977	60	0	204	0	0	60	100
5th	1982	60	1	244	0	0	60	100
6th	1987	60	3	211	0	0	60	100
7th	1989	60	0	140	0	0	60	100
8th	1993	60	1	177	0	0	60	100
9th	1998	60	0	80	0	0	60	100

10th	2003	60	3	222	0	0	60	100
11th	2008	60	4	214	0	0	60	100
12th	2013	60	2	187	0	0	60	100
13th	2018	60	5	190	0	0	60	100

**Source: Chief Electoral officer, Nagaland: Kohima.**

Starting from the First General Election of 1964 to the Thirteenth held in 2018 there had been only a total of 21 women were candidates. The election record reveals the picture of unfavorable socio-political environment and the negative attitude of Naga electorate toward women in state politics was not favorable or supportive. It also indicates that despite negative attitude, the Naga women continued their fight to find a place in the political process dominated by the men. The immediate example is being the 2018 elections which saw the highest number of a total of 5 women candidates from the state.

In electoral politics, to contest in the election by women in high or low degree depends on how gender-sensitive its institutional structures i.e. political parties, and voting behavior of electorate are. Political parties are the major 'gatekeepers' in determining candidates in elected office. They play a critical role in advancing or impeding women's participation in decision-making bodies. In this respect, R. Letha Kumari ((2006) mentions though women play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision-making position in these structure. Some cases the political parties put women candidates on their party list where there less chance for party to win. Very less number of women candidature in Nagaland state election reflect the low priority to women's candidature by political parties. "Political parties in Nagaland are male dominated. They have not genuinely taken up the issues of political participation by women either within the party as leaders or in fielding them as party candidates in election" (Ojha, 2014: 49). The political parties deeply influenced by customs, traditions and social attitudes do not favor putting women candidates in place of men.

A significant aspect of political participation of women is the casting of one's vote which is considered as the basic right of the citizen to express his/her choice as political representative. The Assembly Elections in Nagaland show that women participate as contestants and as voters. Generally women contestants are minuscule compared to that of men, but recent past records show that there has been increase in the percentage of women as voters. As far as the percentage of women voters are concerned, record of the Thirteenth Nagaland state assembly election, 2018 show that 82.48% of women voted as compared to 86.09% of male. In spite of high percentage of female voters, it is unfortunate to note that none of the women candidates occupy a seat in the State Legislative Assembly. This could be attributed to proxy voting by men, for women, which needs a thorough investigation that is outside the scope of the current paper.

Toshimenla Jamir (2012) argues that the Naga women are not independent even in case of voting. The voting behaviour and preference for a party or candidate of women voter is guided by the patriarchal social structure and norms, and they are also influenced by the personal, kinship relation, economic consideration and the family pressure. The voting behaviour is not dependant on any gender issue. Under such socio-cultural circumstances “it remained doubtful whether the right of adult franchise could be used meaningfully by the women of the state to bring about much needed changes in the gender equation of the society” (Jamir, 2012:52).

A cross country study by Pippa Noris and Inglehart Ronald (2001) showed that the societal culture in a state can enhance women participation or exclude them from politics. They argue “in cultures with traditional attitudes toward the role of women in the house and family, many women may be reluctant to run and, if they seek office, may fail to attract sufficient support to win.” (Noris and Ronald, 2001:131). Political parties and voting behaviour of Naga voters are guided by the patriarchal values and customary laws and practices in domestic and community life which have a significance influence in political life and gender justice. “The Naga favour patriarchal social norms and therefore the menfolk take over the superior roles in decision-making” ( Longkumer, 2019:6). Such patriarchal values are dominant not only in public arena but also in domestic arena. “The gender bias in cultural life is imparted through institutions such as family, marriage and community on which the role of gender is obvious” (Niumai, 2015: 355).

Advancement of socio-economic status of modern Naga women has not brought any changes in the status of women in decision making arena and there is not much difference in the political status of women in past and present. Even professionally employed women have the obligations to fulfill her gendered responsibilities as wife, mother, and daughter at home. “Naga women whatever her educational qualifications, her status, her intelligence, talents and all other attributes, still cooks and serves tea and meals to males when they do the ‘decision making’ “ (Changkija,2014:82). The complexity faced by the Naga women on account of their reproductive and domestic pressure marginalizes them from public life. The societal cultures and practices regarding women political participation and representation in Nagaland are not only ‘women unfriendly’ at higher level of political system but also at the local level. At the level of village governance the women are restricted from political participation in the name of customary law. Customary laws are a set of obligatory rules, practices, customs and beliefs of the community framed by its male elders to guide the tribal way of life, which are unwritten and transferred orally from one generation to other. While the Naga customary laws give a lot of freedom and authority to the Naga people in decision making with regard to their socio-cultural practices, the same laws are also politically prohibitive for women members to a large extent. This restrictive practice is clearly visible in the opposition by male members in Naga society against women’s political participation at local government, even today ( Longkumer, 2019).

## Local governance in Nagaland and participation of women

It is believed that women participation at local government can help them in overcoming inequality and subordination that they have been experiencing for ages. Only through direct participation in local decision making bodies, women can empower themselves to break the system of imbalanced distribution of political power based on patriarchal values and the traditional mindset of the people. In case of Nagaland, we cannot squarely blame the tribal leaders, political parties and people for their traditional attitude against women leaders and participation of women in local government in neo-liberal democratic era. It is the constitutional provision and law of the state government, especially the village council act 1978, which is exclusively responsible for protecting and safeguarding the existing practice of cultural and customary law against women's democratic rights of representation and participation local governance. Article 371A of the Indian Constitution protects the Naga autonomy and identity, in other side it infringes upon the political rights of Naga women thereby violating their human rights.

Moreover, this Act does not provide any directive to the state government to ensure gender justice and equal opportunities of all people during implementation of this act. As a result this Act serves as a weapon of the male in Naga society to use against women in sharing of political power with them. Some literatures argued that the misinterpretation of article 371(A) by the native Naga males is a biggest barrier of women's political participation. The government of India introduced Article 371(A) in the constitution to protect and safeguard the customary law of the Nagas which was under threat. But this article has been used by Naga male as an instrument in their own favour in the case of land inheritance and decision making process by suppressing women's rights (Fernandes, 2002). Kikon, (2017) argues:

If Naga customary law is seen as the foundation of justice, the exclusion of women from these powerful decision making-bodies negates the entire notion that these are pillars of justice. The Indian state and the male traditional bodies alike are responsible for excluding the Naga women from all spheres of representative political processes. Article 371 (A) is a prime example of the patriarchal nature of the Indian constitution that bestows the Naga male bodies to have full authority and power to interpret customary affairs covering social, religious, and criminal cases ( Kikon, 2017: 116).

Article 371(A) not only protects and preserves the Naga culture and identity but also facilitate the men to keep women outside in the political arena, which is evident from the ongoing opposition by men in Naga society against the participation of women in local government. Since 1992, after the passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts by the Parliament, almost all the states have implemented the 33% reservation of seats for women in both urban and local government without any opposition and since then, women are more visible and their participation is very high in local politics. The Nagaland Municipal Act 2006 was the first step to introduce democratic decentralization of power to the urban local government with the provision of one-third reservation of seat for women as per the 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment act 1992, which was a bold step of the state government to bring gender equality by integrating

women in local politics. But unfortunately Nagaland is the only state where opposition is still going on from the male members of tribal unions and groups, and political leaders on the grounds that women reservation in Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) would infringe on the special rights guaranteed by Article 371 (A). Non implementation of reservation for women in urban bodies yet indicates the dominance of men over women in political space aided by Article 371 (A) which nurture and promotes such gender bias in political culture.

Not only in urban elected bodies, Article 371(A) also excludes women to participate in rural bodies which is closest to the women by inducting non- elected and patriarchal appointees in Village Council. Participation of women in rural decentralized bodies has been considered as a founding pillar of political training and development of leadership skill among rural women from the grassroots. But due to Article 371(A), the women in Nagaland are exempted to enjoy one- third reservation in rural local bodies along the lines of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992. In democratic Nagaland, the state government has passed the Village Council Act, 1978 with uniform structure of Village council and decentralization of power to all recognized villages of Nagaland. In a democratic framework these institutions are supposed to be open for all to participate including women. But surprising fact is that such legislations exclude women silently without making any provision for their participation at the lowest tier of governance.

Though the state has reserved one- fourth (25%) of the seats for women in the Village Development Boards (VDBs) with the enactment of VDB Model Rules, 1980 the provision of this numerical space for women has no potential to present women as leaders of rural governance. As per the VDB Rules, 1980 the 25% of women members of VDB are appointed by village council and VDB is accountable to Village council not to villagers, which means the women members are under the control of the members of Village Council and they have no freedom to act independently. From the perspective of VDB rules, the women are neither the representative of villagers nor women of the village, they are just appointees of Village Council.

The local governments are the vehicle of socio-economic transformation and women's entry into local governance not only can ensure change in the political system of a state but familial and social perceptions of women and their leadership. The customary laws and traditional practices local governance have proved to be the blockade roads on women's capacity and advancement of women's political participation in Nagaland. Continuous exclusion of women from political participation in local governance institutions is the chief reason that leads to the patriarchal notion that 'politics and political representation is only for men'. Due to the prominence of this traditional notion during election, participation of women to hold seat of power becomes bleak and likewise it negatively effects on women leadership at the state and national governance.

## Conclusion

A formal right to contest in elections, however, is no guarantee that an individual, in this case a woman, can participate effectively. Effective participation in formal electoral politics necessitates a healthy, gender-friendly, political culture wherein women can act, independently and be empowered to develop, design and implement policies. This usually requires challenging traditional patriarchal institutions that limit political participation and activism. Only integration of women at the local government can empower the women to challenge and bring institutional and systematic changes.

Since statehood, Nagaland government has not taken any serious efforts to bring gender equality in either electoral politics or in decentralization policy. Given the careful attention paid to women's representation in national parliament and state assembly the paper finds that both in decentralization and formal electoral politics there are number of factors that operate against women a friendly political domain which includes strong practice of cultural and customary laws, traditional mind set, and dominance of traditional authorities that have undermined the political interest of women in Nagaland.

Contrary to representative democracy women face more obstacles to political engagement at local level. Engendering local government has potential to achieve political equality for all genders. However integration of women depends upon the re-examination of Article 371A and the Nagaland Village Council Act, 1978 from the perspective of gender equality and women's human rights. Direct involvement of women in formulation and implementation of policies as leaders of the local level government can alter prevalent gender-insensitive practices and norms and make democracy more inclusive and egalitarian. Unless women are trained at the grassroots, there is hardly any possibility of their involvement and participation at the level of national politics.

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