



The Role Of Women In Politics: Striving For Equal Participation Among The Sumi Women Of Nagaland

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ABSTRACT

Society has traditionally viewed women as subordinate participants in politics. Despite constituting nearly half of the global population, women's active involvement in politics remains limited. Worldwide, the empowerment of women has attracted significant scholarly attention, emphasizing the urgent need for equality. As a result, various developmental programs have been introduced to integrate women into the development process at all levels. This movement has gained momentum post-independence; yet achieving gender equality remains a distant goal.

This paper explores the challenges faced by Sumi Naga women in a deeply patriarchal society. While they have made significant strides in leadership roles across various sectors, their involvement in politics, particularly in decision-making bodies, is still dominated by men. Although the status of women has improved, political participation remains a significant barrier. The paper examines the evolving roles of Sumi women, the challenges they face in political inclusion, and offers suggestions to enhance their participation and representation in politics.

Keywords: Women, Naga women, Sumi women, political participation.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the enfranchisement of women has drawn academic attention and the issue of political participation and representation of women has come to limelight, in the broader context of democratic concept of representation. The number of democratic countries is increasing worldwide and it is assumed that human rights are protected to a larger extent. Women make up 49.74 percent of the global population according to the World Bank (2022), which comprises approximately half of the total human population. Yet, they continue to remain dominated by men in politics. The feminist theorists have rightly viewed mainstream politics as 'male-stream politics.'

The Nordic countries continue to remain at the top with a share of 44.7 percent representation of women in politics in 2023. The political reality in India continues to be biased despite the massive voter turnouts in elections with evidence from various academic researches and data such as an increase of female voters to 67.18 percent in 2019 Lok Sabha Poll. However, even with more women registering to vote, female voter turnout declined in 2024 compared to 2019, widening the gender gap in political participation.

The increase in women's participation in governance after the introduction of 73rd Amendment Act 1992 has been undisputable but the struggle for equal participation continues to be evidently deplorable. According to Chakravarty, "Women in the northeast dominate societal and domestic affairs, but political domination is not in their hands." This portrays how the domination of men in politics has been dominantly practiced throughout the region.

Similarly, Nagaland constitutes an interesting sample for such analysis. There are many underlying factors such as the socioeconomic, political, cultural and the rigid administrative system. Another factor which is often overlooked is the ideological barrier that exists among the women; this is yet another hindrance among the many barriers towards the quest for equal political participation of women. The patriarchal setting among the Nagas in general and the Sumi community in particular cannot be exaggerated. Sumi women cannot be called as weaker section considering the fact that they have been able to strengthen their leadership roles in terms of education, profession and their contribution towards the society but they continue to lag behind in politics.

A BRIEF PROFILE OF SUMI NAGAS

The Sumi Nagas, formerly known as the Sema Nagas, are one of the major ethnic tribes in Nagaland. Their headquarters is in Zunheboto district, also referred to as the 'Land of Warriors.' The exact origins of the Sumi people are not clearly documented in written records, but their history can be traced through oral traditions and a few scholarly writings. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the Sumi Nagas practiced headhunting using weapons such as spears, machetes (Dao), arrows, and crossbows. They were known for their fierce yet reconciliatory nature, and the men took pride in their heroic past, which emphasized bravery, valor, and courage. However, the introduction of Christianity and education brought about significant changes in their societal dynamics.

Politically, the Chief held a central and powerful role within the traditional system of governance, with considerable authority at the highest level. Chieftainship was hereditary, typically passed down through patrilineal succession. Even today, Chiefs continue to serve as the chairmen of most village councils. The Sumi society is deeply patriarchal, with male dominance prevailing, and descent passing from father to son. Traditionally, women were excluded from warfare, war dances, hunting, and political matters.

POLITICAL STATUS OF NAGA WOMEN

Women in Naga society still have a long way to go before they accomplish their quest for gender parity. According to 2011 census of Nagaland, women constitute 48.21 percent with high literacy rate of 76.11 percent; and nearly half of the electorate (table 1), women continue to remain politically underrepresented in Nagaland. Till date, only two women from Nagaland have been elected; Rano.M.Shaiza was elected to the sixth Lok Sabha in 1977 and S.Phangnon Konyak nominated as a member of Rajya Sabha in 2022.

Their leadership roles have shown considerable changes in other spheres; it is estimated that if the skills and talents of women are fully recognized, the overall developmental outcomes are set to grow tremendously. In recent years, there has been a positive trend in Nagaland, with increasing interest among women across all segments of society to engage in income-generating activities, self-employment, and entrepreneurship and most importantly the growing number of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Nagaland. Yet, their inclusiveness in decision making bodies is still a distant dream. Nagaland witnessed the highest number of women candidates in 2018 Assembly election (table 2) but no woman was elected. It was only in 2023 that the state elected its first two

women legislators in its 60 years of statehood. The under-representation of women in politics depicts how it is a contemplation of a current state-of-affairs instead of a corollary of democratic governance. The state is still lagging far behind other states when it comes to the number of elected women.

In a nutshell, larger portion of political party, voters, cultural factors are some major barriers that are less likely to favor gender parity.

Table 1: Gender difference in voting in Nagaland Legislative Assembly, 1969-2023

| Year | Voters | | | Voters who voted | | | % of voters | | Differences in vote |
|------|------------|------------|---------|------------------|---------|---------|-------------|-------|---------------------|
| | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | |
| 1969 | 93829 | 83102 | 176931 | 72196 | 67132 | 139328 | 76.94 | 80.78 | 3.84 |
| 1974 | 221223 | 173847 | 395070 | 161164 | 1316484 | 297648 | 71.85 | 78.50 | 5.65 |
| 1977 | 214812 | 183223 | 398035 | 176666 | 154795 | 331461 | 82.24 | 84.48 | 2.24 |
| 1982 | 330290 | 266163 | 596453 | 240422 | 203500 | 443922 | 72.79 | 76.45 | 3.66 |
| 1987 | 319529 | 262772 | 582301 | 266033 | 225891 | 491924 | 83.25 | 85.96 | 2.71 |
| 1989 | 320611 | 261805 | 582416 | 273574 | 2255248 | 498822 | 85.25 | 86.03 | 0.71 |
| 1993 | 427450 | 387355 | 814805 | 387448 | 347494 | 734942 | 90.64 | 89.70 | 0.94 |
| 2003 | 529517 | 485363 | 1014880 | 474181 | 417316 | 891497 | 89.54 | 85.98 | 3.56 |
| 2008 | 666391 | 635875 | 1302266 | 573021 | 549362 | 1122383 | 85.98 | 86.93 | 0.41 |
| 2013 | 603831 | 58553 | 1193384 | 581782 | 579291 | 1171335 | 89.82 | 91.22 | 1.4 |
| 2018 | 59728 1 | 57915 1 | 1176432 | 487832 | 498561 | 986393 | 81.68 | 86.08 | 4.4 |
| 2023 | 66081 2 | 65525 2 | 1316064 | 554485 | 570972 | 1125457 | 83.91 | 87.14 | 3.23 |

Source: Election Commission of India report on Nagaland Legislative Assembly 1969-2023

Table 2: Women Candidates in Nagaland Legislative Assembly, 1969-2023

| Year | Name | Party | Constituency | Result |
|------|------------------|-------|---------------------------|--------|
| 1969 | Ravolu- ü | UNF | 6 A/C Western Angami | Lost |
| | R.L Kinghen | IND | 40 A/C Bhandari | Lost |
| 1974 | Nil | - | - | - |
| 1977 | Nil | - | - | - |
| 1982 | Rano.M. Shaiza | IND | 8 A/C Western Angami | Lost |
| 1987 | Sebule | IND | 7 A/C Peren | Lost |
| | Chubalemla | NNDP | 22 A/C Arkong | Lost |
| | Lochumlo Yanthan | IND | 40 A/C Bhandari | Lost |
| 1989 | Nil | - | - | - |
| 1993 | R.L Kinghen | INC | 7 A/C Tyui | Lost |
| 1998 | Nil | - | - | - |
| 2003 | Anupama Mach | IND | 3 A/C Dimapur-III | Lost |
| | Akheli | INC | 5 A/C Ghaspani-II | Lost |
| | Chubalemla | NPF | 26 A/C Aonglenden | Lost |
| 2008 | Akheli | IND | 3 A/C Dimapur- III | Lost |
| | Rhakila | NCP | 54 A/C Tuensang Sadar- II | Lost |
| | Soly Sangtam | BJP | 60 A/C Pungro | Lost |
| 2013 | Dr.Yangerla | IND | 27 A/C Mokokchung Town | Lost |
| | Rhakila | BJP | 54 A/C Tuensang Sadar- II | Lost |

| | | | | |
|------|-------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
| 2018 | Wedie-ü Kronu | NPP | 3 A/C Dimapur-III | Lost |
| | Rekha Rose Dukru | IND | 17 A/C Chizami | Lost |
| | Awan Konyak | NDPP | 47 A/C Aboi | Lost |
| | Dr.K.Mangyangpula | NPP | 51A/C Noksen | Lost |
| | Chang Rhakila | BJP | 54 A/C Tuensang Sadar-II | Lost |
| 2023 | Hekani Jakhalu | NDPP | 3 Dimapur-II | Won |
| | Rosy Thomson | INC | 6 Tenning | Lost |
| | Salhoutunuo Kruse | NDPP | 8 Western Angami | Won |
| | Er. Kahuli Sema | BJP | 32 Atoizu | Lost |

Source: Report on General Elections to Nagaland Legislative Assembly 1969-2023

THE CHANGING STATUS OF SUMI WOMEN: A CALL FOR A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the past, the role of Sumi women was largely restricted to domestic life, with male dominance prevailing in every aspect of society. Political involvement for Sumi women was virtually nonexistent. However, there is a rare instance in Sumi history where a woman held the position of Chief (also known as GB, Gaon Bora). According to oral tradition, a village called 'Ighanumi' was once led by a man named Ghopfuna, who served as the village Chief until his death in 1936. Following his passing, his wife, Teli, succeeded him as the Chief, making her the only woman in Sumi history to hold this position. This is particularly noteworthy because, even in today's society where Sumi women are advancing in leadership roles, no other woman has been appointed as Chief. Teli's leadership is remarkable not just for her position but because she was a charismatic and capable leader who worked tirelessly for the betterment of her village. She had learned the ways of Chieftainship during her husband's tenure and was appointed to the role due to her qualifications, gaining the support of both women and men in her community. She served as Chief for a significant period, upholding her duties with respect and demonstrating her competence. Teli's leadership inspired admiration and support, especially from women both in her village and in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. Her story remains a powerful example of female leadership and continues to be passed down through folklore.

Today, Sumi women are taking on important roles by finding various ways to support their families, with many highly educated women excelling in professions that are on par with, or even exceed, those of men. In the past, a separate dormitory system existed for males (called Apuki) and females (called Iliki). The female dormitory was primarily used to teach girls traditional feminine skills like weaving and household tasks, and girls' education was limited to learning to read scriptures and hymns. Even within churches, women were excluded from attending board meetings. Against the backdrop of such restricted roles and a deeply patriarchal society, Sumi women today are breaking through barriers and making significant contributions to their communities.

For example, Dr. Toshevi Keditsu Sema became the first Sumi woman to earn a medical degree in 1977. She further supports women by awarding the "Dr. Toshevi Sumi Totimi MBBS Award" annually to women who pass the National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test, offering cash prize and certificate. Dr. Kalito Hokishe Kiho became the first female Deacon Council Chairperson at the Sumi Baptist Church Zunheboto in 2020. Architect Honoholi K. Chishi-Zhimomi made a notable contribution by designing one of Asia's largest churches in Zunheboto district in 2017.

Mrs. Suniho Zhimomi made history as the first Sumi woman to serve as the Village Development Board (VDB) Secretary at Xukhepu village in Zunheboto district, holding the position for two consecutive terms from 2009 to 2018. And most recently, Hekani Jakhalu made history by becoming the first Sumi woman to be elected to the Legislative Assembly, among the first two women ever elected to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly.

These women have set remarkable examples by breaking boundaries, but questions remain about the support they received from male counterparts, their sense of empowerment, and how their professions impacted their personal lives. Additionally, there is curiosity about whether their achievements have led to greater representation of Sumi women.

The author interviewed these women, including one political leader (the first Sumi woman VDB Secretary), to gain insight into their experiences. Dr. Kalito, the first female Deacon Council Chairperson at the Sumi Baptist Church Zunheboto and a retired principal of Zunheboto Government College shared that although she encountered mixed reactions, she remained optimistic and fully committed to her work in the Church. She expressed a desire for greater female representation across all fields and highlighted the importance of education and the role of women in society. In the political realm, she stated, “Women must be willing to vote for women candidates; as long as voters’ attitudes remain unchanged, women will struggle to succeed in elections.” Architect Honoholi, in contrast, mentioned, “I have never experienced discrimination in my profession; the bias comes from home, not from education or work. I felt empowered not as a woman, but as an Architect, and it has been an incredible experience.” She further advised, “Find a balance; you can be anything you want in any profession.”

These women clearly demonstrate perseverance and ambition, showing how, despite the challenges of a strongly patriarchal society, they have not been deterred. Their experiences also reveal that the expectation of women fulfilling a “dual role” remains a challenge, but it has not stopped them from achieving their goals.

Underneath all these massive lines of contributions by Sumi women, when it comes to authority and power in politics, the marginalization still prevail. Data (table 2) shows that only two Sumi women; candidate Akheli and Hekani Jakhalu has contested in State Legislative Assembly Election in 2003, 2008 & 2023 respectively; Mrs. Kakheli Jakhalu held the post of president of “All Nagaland Congress Women” for two tenures. The first significant instance of a Sumi woman breaking political barriers occurred at the grassroots level of politics; Mrs. Suniho Zhimomi became the first Sumi woman Village Development Board (VDB) Secretary at Xukhepu village under Zunheboto district for two consecutive terms (2009-2018). She was elected unanimously by the people because of her befitting capability; she received the President’s Award (Nirmal Gram Paraskar) in 2011 & the best VDB secretary under Zunheboto in 2017. This portrays her massive contribution towards the village in particular and the Sumi society in general. On being asked if the notion of ‘dual role of woman’ affected her in any way; Mrs. Suniho remarked, “I dedicated myself fully to this position, and it has never interfered with my responsibilities as a woman. In fact, I also served as the woman secretary for Aizuto and as a member of the Sumi Totimi Hoho (Sumi Women Organization).” She further stated, “I would not have reached these milestones without the enthusiastic support of both male and female members who collaborated with me from the very start, never hesitating to assist.” In an interview with the *Indian Express*, Hekani, a politician and social entrepreneur who received the Nari Shakti Puraskar Award in 2018 and the renowned Schneider Electric Prema Award in 2021, expressed that her success is helping to break barriers for women, promote their ambitions, and confront the challenges they encounter in politics. However, she also shared that the pressure and responsibility were overwhelming, as the state had never elected a woman candidate before.

It took 60 years for the state to elect its first women legislators in general, and specifically for the Sumi community. While this marks a step forward for women’s political participation, the long delay in electing female candidates, along with the still low number of women representatives and candidates, clearly highlights the dominance of men in politics. This underscores the ongoing need for society to fully embrace and support women in political roles.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Today, the growing interest of women in politics is evident in their increasing participation as voters, engagement in grassroots politics, and the gradual, though limited, progress as candidates for political representation in decision-making bodies. While it is encouraging to see that women have achieved noticeable parity with men in areas like education, entrepreneurship, and leadership roles, they still face marginalization in political institutions. Women's representation is crucial as it inspires more women to pursue political involvement. Studies show that including women in politics fosters sustainability, offers fresh perspectives on political issues, addresses racial and gender concerns more effectively, and leads to positive outcomes for community welfare.

However, there is a persistent resistance, rooted in traditional laws and political parties' reluctance to include women in decision-making roles, as well as cultural norms that perceive women primarily as caregivers, limiting their roles to the private sphere. This is further compounded by voter backlash. Cultural and socioeconomic factors should play a role in determining who enters the pool of potential political candidates. As women meet the necessary, though often unwritten, qualifications for public office, they are more likely to pursue candidacy and hold office. Party policies should influence the positioning of women on party ballots, thereby improving their chances of being elected. Electoral rules, which establish how candidates are chosen as representatives, should therefore have a direct impact on increasing women's political representation.

Gender equality in political representation should not be about appointing women to positions of power simply because of their gender. Rather, it should ensure that women are not excluded from political roles because of their gender. In this context, the equal political participation of Sumi women is essential. This can only happen if political parties and the electorate offer equal support to women, and if the rigid gender expectations in a patriarchal Sumi society inspire women to pursue leadership roles, as they do in education and socioeconomic spheres. Every barrier reflects the deep-rooted impact of socioeconomic and cultural dominance on women's political participation. The question still remains whether these are the only influencing factors, or if the current status quo has created an ideological barrier that makes women believe they are incapable. It is time to critically examine this issue, and women must break through political barriers, just as they have in other fields, to drive change forward.

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- Interviewed the following individuals: 1. Nihovi Chophy (82), retired DIS, GB Old Town Colony, Zunheboto, 2. Mrs. Suniho Zhimomi, 3. Architect Honoholi. K. Chishi-Zhimomi, 4. Dr. Kalito Hokishe Kiho.

