

Women Political Participation: A Study of Urban Local Self-Government in Nagaland

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Abstract

Women constitute approximately fifty percent of the Naga society, but they are excluded from institutions of decision making bodies both traditional and modern and therefore, their political representation still remains backward. Though women are never treated as slaves by their husbands in Naga society, their existence is overshadowed by male dominance. One of the main issues of the contemporary Naga society is the issue of women's political rights. Therefore, the focus of discussion in this paper is to vigorously analyze the prevailing conditions of Naga women, despite the presence of reservation policy adopted for creating gender equality. Further it also studies women's participation in Urban Local Self-Government in Nagaland vis-à-vis the jurisdictions of traditional political institutions. It concludes that women's political participation is essential for all round human development and a necessary condition for human existence.

Keywords: Naga Society, Decision Making, Political Participation, Reservation, Naga Women.

1. Introduction

To have a clear picture of women political participation in contemporary Naga society, it is important to delve into the social structure and conditions of women in traditional Naga society. Naga society being a traditional society, their customs, beliefs and practices, in-fact the overall aspect of their society, is based on tradition and culture. Thus, to understand the political participation of women in Naga society it is important to understand the cultural settings of their society. When compared to women of the rest of the country, Naga women are basically independent and free and their role in the community and family are considerably recognized. But as far as Naga customary law is concerned, women have no right to inherit the property of her father. For instance, among the Lotha Nagas women cannot inherit the properties of her father. The daughters in a family are usually excluded from the inheritance list, but in some cases like a son less family or abundant self- acquired properties, they may be offered with some part of the properties. The daughters, before their marriage, could enjoy the properties of the family. But as soon as they are married, such privileges cease to exist (Athungo Ovung: 2012). Similarly, a woman in Ao Naga society suffers from disqualifications in the following ways (Talitemjen Ao: 1980):

1. She cannot become a member of *Tatar Putu Menden* (the traditional village administrative body among the Ao Naga tribe constituted of representatives from different clans).
2. She cannot become a *Putir* (priest), even though she may be the oldest person in the village. Thus, she is debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices.
3. She cannot inherit landed property.

In the Naga society, the village, not the tribe is the primary political and social unit. The Naga society, with its patriarchal and patrilocal system, does not permit women in decision making at the village administrative unit. As J.P Mills has noted, "As with all Nagas the real political unit of the tribe is the village". Every Naga knows that all discussions should lead to some conclusions, and once a decision is arrived at, a Naga is ready to obey it. He has a great respect for his village elders and tribal chieftains (Joseph Puthempurakal: 1984). However, despite similarities found among Naga tribes, there also exist variations in cultural, social and political systems particular to each tribe. For instance, the Semas and Konyaks have hereditary monarchy, the Angamis, Lothas etc have their own peculiar type of political system which is democratic in nature. In spite of these slight variations in their administrative framework one thing is evident, that women in every tribe are unrepresented in the decision making at the local level. Take for instance, among the Ao tribe, the traditional village administrative body which is called as the *Putu Menden*, from time immemorial till date, one cannot trace any woman as its member. In the traditional polity and administrative activities of the Ao system of *Putu Menden*, the status of a woman is overshadowed by her male counterpart. Women do not participate in the administration of the village irrespective of who they are. They are not entitled to membership in the village council and hence have no say in the decision making process (Temjensosang: 2013). Similarly in the Angami societies, when the villagers meet to make decisions, women are not allowed to voice their opinion. The male clubs where decisions are taken are taboo for women. The tradition of female exclusion from important decision making processes is to be similarly found in almost every Naga tribe (Toshimenla Jamir: 2012). Thus, the decision for the administration of the village and the society exclusively rest with men.

2. Women Political Participation in Contemporary Naga Society

Looking from the National perspectives for women development the tenth plan (2002-2007) approach aims at empowering women through translating the National Policy for Empowerment of women in action and ensuring survival, protection and development of women

and children through Right Based Approach. Despite this, there remains a great deal to be done to secure women's equal status in Indian society (Gopal Sharma and Ranjan Kr.Das: 2008). Today for effective National Development, women in every society needs to be recognized and their contribution appreciated. The status of women in any society is indicated by their political participation, representation and their share in decision making bodies. In the contemporary Naga society, education has enabled women to successfully participate in many fields apart from politics. One can find high ranking women officers, bureaucrats, women heading district administration, educational institutions, etc and have made positive impacts and contributed a lot to the socio-economic spheres of life. In spite of their contributions in many areas, patriarchy in Nagaland still deny women's equal status and opportunities in electoral politics and hence, women are conspicuously missing in the political arena. Today, in an advancing society, if women are not included in the political process it may result in policies reflecting only the male perspective. Thus, practically, it may lead to allocation of resources and decision which may not be in the interest of women (R.W. Connell: 1990).

In Naga society the political participation of women remain as low as before (see table 1.1 below). Just as Naga women were traditionally not allowed to participate in community debates or discussions, this practice still continues till date. Like-wise even in the sphere of non-governmental organizations there are no women representatives whether at tribal level or state level. The Naga Hoho, the apex traditional decision making bodies in the state are always represented by men and not even a single woman had so far represented it. When it comes to politics women have no freedom even to express their opinion freely and they are compelled to follow what men folk direct them to do so (Athungo Ovung: 2012). Like the rest of the women in the country, Naga women have the right to suffrage but their right to participate in decision making and representation are overshadowed by patriarchal norms. However, it is to be noted that allowing women only to cast their votes and to support male candidates only cannot be called as political progress and as such women empowerment through their political participation is proved to be a fallacy in Nagaland.

Table 1.1 Table showing the total number of women candidates in the Nagaland State Assembly Elections from 1964-2013.

| <i>Year</i> | <i>No. of Assembly Seats</i> | <i>No. of Women Candidates</i> | <i>No. of Women Elected</i> |
|-------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1964 | 40 | Nil | Nil |
| 1969 | 40 | 2 | Nil |
| 1974 | 60 | Nil | Nil |
| 1977 | 60 | Nil | Nil |
| 1982 | 60 | Nil | Nil |
| 1987 | 60 | 3 | Nil |
| 1989 | 60 | Nil | Nil |
| 1993 | 60 | 1 | Nil |
| 2003 | 60 | 3 | Nil |
| 2008 | 60 | 4 | Nil |
| 2013 | 60 | 2 | Nil |
| Total | | 15 | Nil |

Source: Report on the General Elections to Nagaland Legislative Assembly, 1963-2013.

Ever since Nagaland attained statehood on 1st December 1963, twelve General Assembly Elections to the State Legislative Assembly have been conducted, and a total of 15 women candidates have contested the elections so far but not a single woman has been elected to the State Legislative Assembly till now. Of the 60 seat Assembly in 2013 only two women candidates contested the election but unfortunately both of them lost. Similarly in the last Assembly election in the year 2008, four women had contested the election but none of them could emerge victorious to break the glass ceiling. This is the reality of women and politics in Naga society.

3 Women in Urban Local Self-Government in Nagaland: Constraints and Challenges

Evolution of Panchayat Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies in India has its own historical base. Urban Local Bodies in its present form may be said to have its origin in 1687 when the East India Company first set up a municipal corporation in Madras. Lord Ripon's famous

but largely abortive resolution of 1882 invested in local government with a distinct philosophy but it was not until the inauguration in 1921 of Government of India Act 1919, that it began to acquire the character of self governing institution and to be taken with a greater measure of seriousness (S.R Maheshwari: 1979).

For the all round human development, political empowerment of women is a necessity. Thus, keeping in mind the political empowerment of women at the grass root level, the Government of India stressed towards local government and administration through the Constitution of India. Therefore, Government of India passed the 73rd (for Panchayat Raj institution) and 74th (for Municipalities) Constitutional Amendment Act in the year 1992 which also has a clause that gave due recognition to women in the rural and urban local politics. Through these Amendments the ideal of good governance at the local level was ensured. Article 243T speaks about reservation of seats in municipalities for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes and Women. In which not less than one-thirds of seats are reserved for women of every categories. As an immediate consequence of these directives a little more than one-third of elected seats are occupied by women in all urban local bodies in the country (Archana Ghosh: 2003). As a result today women are directly participating in the local politics throughout the country.

But the fact is that, the reality of women reservation and its implementation in the local bodies in the state of Nagaland is very dismaying. Nagaland being a pre-dominantly tribal society had their own local traditional self-governing institution in the form of village councils in each village which were sovereign entities by all accounts within their jurisdictions. Therefore the need to implement the Panchayat Raj system of local administration was not deemed necessary. Urban areas were administered through the Town Committees which gave way to Municipal Councils through the Nagaland Municipal Act 2001. However, this Act predictably did not take cognizance of the provisions under the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act which provided for one-third reservation of seats for women. After much lobbying by concerned Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and women groups in the State, the provision for one-third reservation for women at the Municipal Councils was finally incorporated into the legislation through the Nagaland Municipal (Amendment) Act 2006 (Toshimenla Jamir: 2012). However elections to the municipal bodies have not yet been materialized in Nagaland till now even after Amendment of the Nagaland Municipal Act in the year 2006. In regard to this issue, when Mokokchung Municipal Council which was supposed to go for poll in the year 2008, election could not be held

and was indefinitely deferred. This was because there were many (mostly men) who opposed the reservation policy for women.

Despite legislations granting women's representation in decision making bodies like Town and Municipal Councils, patriarchal mindset and culture of male dominance prohibit women from enjoying their entitlements (Anjuman Ara Begum: 2014). Women groups have been constantly submitting memorandums to ensure the proper implementation of the Nagaland Municipal Amendment Act, 2006. To address women reservation issue, Action Committee on Women's Reservation in Nagaland (ACWRN) was formed with representatives from the Naga Mothers' Association, Eastern Naga Women Organization, Watsu Mongdang and the Naga Women Hoho, Dimapur to ensure that women get their share in politics through the implementation of the Nagaland Municipal 1st Amendment Act 2006. A writ petition on behalf of Naga Women was filed in June 2011, at the Guwahati High Court, Kohima to immediately hold elections for the Municipal and Town Council throughout Nagaland with one-third of the seats reserved for women in accordance with Article 243T(3) of the Constitution of India and Section 23A of the Nagaland (First Amendment) Act, 2006. However, the cabinet decided to postpone indefinitely the Municipal and Town Councils election that was due in January 2010 due to ongoing peace process in the state¹.

According to a recent study conducted by Toshimenla Jamir (2012) she found out that seventy-two percent of Naga women are in favour of reservation, with just twenty-three percent against the policy and five percent with no response. This clearly shows reservation policy is supported by a fairly large number of women population inspite of stiff opposition by many males.

In order to assess the view of public on whether to include women in municipal bodies, the question-Do you think that women should be included in municipal bodies in Nagaland? was raised randomly to 100 respondents, both male and female, through the use of questionnaire method of data collection. Data was collected by using stratified random sampling and purposive sampling. Ample care was taken to ensure representative sample. The pattern of answer is given in the table 1.2 below:

1. W.P.(c) No.147(K)-Gauhati High Court Kohima Bench

Table 1.2: Shows the distribution of response over the question whether to include women in municipal bodies in Nagaland.

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Total No. of Respondents</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| Gender | Male | 44 | 2 |
| | Female | 54 | Nil |
| Total | 100 | 98 | 2 |

From table 1.2 it is found that almost all the respondents (98%) opined that women should be included in the municipal bodies in Nagaland, they opined that since Naga women today can compete with men in equal terms in many fields, with proper education, training and support Naga women can take a strong hold in politics like the rest of the women in the country and can enter into politics at the higher level democratically. Whereas, only a very negligible percentage of the respondents (2%) are of the opinion that women should not be included in municipal bodies.

The question: Do you think that reservation of one-third of seats to women in the municipality under Article 243T will affect the norms of Patriarchy in Nagaland? - was asked to respondents both male and female. The response pattern is given in the table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Shows the nature of response on whether reservation will affect patriarchy in Nagaland.

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Total No. of Respondents</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| Gender | Male | 44 | 2 |
| | Female | 54 | Nil |
| Total | 100 | 98 | 2 |

A large number of the respondents (62%) attributed that reservation of one-third of seats will not affect the norms of patriarchy; they opined that village administration is based on traditional norms and rules. On the other hand, urban administration is purely based on modern democratic principles. Therefore, these two should not be confused. While 34% feel that reservation will affect the norms of patriarchy, they are of the opinion that traditionally women were excluded from decision making bodies and therefore, their inclusion will break the age old

status quo maintained by men. Another 4% of the respondents were undecided as to whether it will affect patriarchy or not.

4 Conclusion

The 74th Constitutional Amendment has provided a milestone for the inclusion of women in politics in India from the grass-root level. But political empowerment of women could not be meaningfully understood just by ascertaining their physical presence alone. In fact participation in terms of physical presence in itself is marred by a number of social factors such as illiteracy, unawareness, burden of domestic work, social and family commitments, male centric social values, fear of character assassination, etc (Sujata D. Hazarika: 2006). Women empowerment in terms of their political participation in Naga society can achieve greater success only when psychology and attitudes of the masses are motivated. Political empowerment of women is only a means to achieve a goal. Women themselves must be able to come up and break the shackles and raise their voice for their improvement. Other external forces may be there but if Naga women are not prepared then all attempts for their political empowerment will prove to be futile. Along with these, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) have a big role to play in this regard. In Nagaland, today the movement of women NGOs has gained considerable momentum slowly. For instance, Naga Mothers Association (NMA), a State level voluntary women association which is the apex body and the voice of women in Nagaland established in 1984 against social evils like, alcoholism, drug addiction, peacemaking and general solution for Naga problems is tirelessly investing their efforts to bring equality and justice and to gain equal participation of women in urban local politics. Along with NMA the Watsu Mungdang the apex body of the Ao women is also working for the Naga women. All these are possible because of the greater emancipation of women in many other fields as we have seen above. Education has helped Naga women to built confidence in themselves. Perhaps, education is one of the major reasons as to why women in Nagaland emerge as important civic actors. However, despite all their efforts they have a long way to achieve success to break the glass ceiling and be visible in the political arena.

Thus, for all round human development and progress women empowerment has become a necessity today. As women problems can best be understood by women, they should not be excluded from the important decision making bodies. Naga Women, if allowed to develop freely, can set their own goals, develop their own approach and take their own decisions. Thus, their creativity and problem solving skills will be tapped to the fullest which will result in over all human progress and development.

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