

Effects of Reservation in Creating Spaces for Women in Urban Local Governance with Special Reference to Guwahati Municipal Corporation, Assam

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Abstract:

Participation of women being the backbone of Indian Political System always remained a matter of utmost importance. India has primarily relied on the reservation policy for inclusion of women in local self governance – rural and urban governance. The enactment of 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 have provided several measures to ensure decentralization and empowerment of urban local governments in the country. Undoubtedly this Act has changed the face of India's municipal and town committees. In this context, the present study tries to examine the effects and significance of reservation policy in urban local governance.

Keywords: Participation; Reservation; Constitutional Amendment Act; Urban Local Governance; Decentralization; Empowerment

Introduction:

Political Participation is a condition that determines the shape of political life and also an indicator for development. The concept of democracy would prosper only when unfeigned and constructive participation occurred. The issue of participation of women in political affairs has become very pivotal in the present global situation where an increasing awareness to remove inequality, to bring out gender equality, to provide equal opportunity in the sharing of resources and in the decision making processes has become the emergent call of the day.

Almost half of the population of the world is constituted by women, but their political, economic and social position is much lower than that of man. Everywhere in the world, in the policy and decision making processes whether it be in the national level, regional level or local level governance, women are not creditably and competently represented. According to the report of UN Women, 2021 women are underrepresented at all levels of decision making worldwide and achieving gender parity in political life is far off. According to the report, it has found that globally women hold only 21 percent of ministerial positions and only 25 percent of all national parliamentarians are women. Unarguably, politics is a complicated process and dominated by man, represents the closing boundary in the quest for gender equality and justice.

Urban Local Governance:

The management of local affairs by local bodies which have been directly elected by the local people can be regarded as Local Self- Government. In India, there are two types of Local self- Government – Urban Local Government and Rural Local Government. The urban local government operates in towns and cities through municipal institutions which include municipal corporations, committees, councils, cantonment boards, town and notified area committees (Sharma, 2015, pg-30). As per Article 243 Q (1) of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), the institution of urban local bodies has three types – Municipal Corporation for larger areas, municipal council or board for smaller urban areas and nagar Panchayats for transitional areas. The members of the municipal bodies are elected through direct election for a period of five years and in accordance of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, all states provided for one-third reservation to women and in proportion to their population to Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes. The total strength of the members of municipal bodies varies from state to state based broadly on population. For example, the total strength of municipal corporations in Maharashtra is 65-227, in Guwahati municipal corporation, Assam the strength is 31. According to Prasad & Pardhasaradhi (2020) in most of the states of India, the mayors and chairpersons are elected indirectly by the members of the municipal council, while in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, the mayors and chairpersons are elected directly by the electorate (pg-5).

Conceptual Framework: Women Empowerment

The concept of women empowerment can be considered as a multi faceted and dynamic exercise which entitled women to their full recognition and potentiality in the fields of socio-economic, political, decision making power in the household activities. In contemporary India, primarily in local governance, women empowerment is increasingly being considered as a pivotal necessity for comprehensive development. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Acts, 1992 made governance and development inclusive by accommodating the marginalized section of the society i.e. women into the local self government institutions. According to Sundar ram (2012) recent initiative adopted by the Government of India for enhancing reservation of seats for women from 33 percent to 50 percent in Panchayati raj institutions and Municipalities will increase the scope for accessing local governance, influence decision making processes, facilitate representation of various views and opinions provided opportunities for accessing these institutions are not limited to the traditional bases of family and patronage (pg-20). Thus, this pragmatic move would be determining factor in strengthening the grassroots democratic traditions and will make our democracy more meaningful and representative both for men and women. This would perhaps lead a transformation in Indian polity and governance for women empowerment as equal partners in decision making process at the grassroots level.

Review of Literature:

Prasad and Pardhasaradhi (2020) in the article “Twenty- Five Years of the Constitution Seventy –Fourth Amendment Act, 1992: Promise and Performance” published in “Indian Journal of Public Administration” I-20, mentions that in pursuance of the 74th Constitutional amendment Act, 1992 provisions have been made to hold urban local body elections regularly, reservations to women and weaker sections, constitute election and finance commissions and district and metropolitan planning committees. However, it has been observed that after 26 years of its implementation, the states seem to be half hearted to decentralize democracy, reluctant to empower urban local bodies, functionally and financially and unwilling to clothe them with autonomy.

Kamana (2017) in the paper “Empowerment of Women Representatives through Urban Governance: A Study of Urban Local Bodies in Haryana” published in “International Journal of Research in Social Sciences”, Vol. 7, Issue-11 reveals that elected women representatives being the part of local bodies are not performing their duties effectively. They are controlled either by their husbands, sons or male members. But with the introduction of reservation policy, women has attain an opportunity to take active part in the local government affairs thereby making way for women empowerment and to prove their potential as a good leader.

Shakun Sharma (2015) in the paper “Creating Spaces for Women: Inclusion through Reservation in Urban Local Governance” published in “Journal of Politics & Governance”, Vol. 5, No.1 argues that the policy of reservation of seats for women in local governance resulted in spaces being created for better and increased participation by women as a group. It has created an opportunity for women to attain confidence, visibility and knowledge of the political field. It can be assumed that if women were empowered politically, there is no doubt that they can contribute very sincerely in the planning, execution and implementation of developmental schemes.

Ghorpade (2012) in the article “reservation of Women in Local Bodies for inclusive Growth in India” published in the edited book “Reservations for Women in Rural and Urban Local Bodies in India” edited by Sundar Ram argues that reservation for women is not required since invariably every constituency has close to 50 percent women voters. Every woman contesting in election should get elected if all the women voters cast their vote in favour of women candidates. However, in reality women voters do not mechanically vote for women candidates as they are either not satisfied with the women candidate, super imposed political party affiliation, caste and community bias- a combination of these factors ultimately influences the woman voter while casting their mandate.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objective of this paper is to study the effects of reservation policy of women in urban local governance and also to highlight the inclusive essence of reservation policy.

Research Question:

Is the provision of reservation of 74th Constitutional Amendment Act truly inclusive for women in urban local governance?

Study Area:

For the present study, Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC), Assam is accepted, which is the only urban local body in Guwahati responsible for administering 216 sq. km of GMC areas. In accordance of the Assam Legislative Act 1969, the GMC was established and started its functioning from 1974. Initially, the GMC has 60 wards but the total wards of GMC were reduced

to 31 from 60 wards on 12th April 2013 under the provision of Assam Nagar Raj Act, 2007. At present, the GMC has 31wards and 90 area sabhas.

Research Methodology:

A total of 15 women representatives (ex-councillors) of GMC were selected on simple random basis. For the collection of primary data, an interview schedule was prepared and GMC official records were also collected to extract detail information. Literary writings of scholars, journals, newspaper, magazines, internet, etc. were used for collection of secondary sources.

Discussion and Findings of the study:

Women of Assam are more visible in local government than State legislature and Parliament in contemporary day than they were in the past. Their percentage of participation in GMC is also high than before. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 provided 33% reservation facility for women’s participation in local self government. Consequently, more and more women contest in the GMC elections from unreserved as well as reserved constituency. Till date 5 numbers of GMC elections has been conducted.

Table 1.1 Number of Elected Women Representatives from all the GMC Elections

| Sl. Nos. of Elections | Year of Elections | Number of wards for each elections | Number of Women candidates | Number of Elected Women Representatives | Implementation of Reservation Policy for Women |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | 1974 | 34 | 0 | 0 | No |
| 2 | 1979 | 34 | 4 | 0 | No |
| 3 | 1995 | 60 | 36 | 19 | Yes |
| 4 | 2003 | 57 | 57 | 19 | Yes |
| 5 | 2013 | 31 | 72 | 10 | Yes |
| | | | Total-169 | Total - 48 | |

Source: Election Commission, Assam

The table 1.1 clearly reveals that no women have been elected in the first two elections. But with the introduction of reservation policy for women in local government a total of 48 numbers of women have been elected as GMC representatives in the last three GMC elections. Moreover, the number of women candidates is also increasing with the passage of time. The study reveals that the political parties or the male counterparts though reluctant to give equal opportunities to women in the political arena, but the 74th CAA,1992 has compelled them to penetrate for women into formal representative institutions of decision making.

Table 1.2 Are you aware of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which is related to the election of Municipal Corporation?

| Category | No. of respondent | Percentage (%) |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 8 | 54 % |
| No | 4 | 26 % |
| Cannot Say | 3 | 20 % |
| Total | 15 | 100% |

Source: Interview with the respondents

The table 1.2 shows that 54 % respondents were aware of the 74th Constitutional Amendment; 26 % respondent admitted that they did not know in details about the 74th Amendment. 20% respondent could not say anything related to the amendment. The researcher observed that the qualified respondents were quite aware of the amendment whereas the respondent with less qualification were not aware of the amendment.

1.3 Do you agree with the view that 74th Amendment has empowered the women by providing reservation of seat in the urban local bodies like GMC?

| Category | No. of respondent | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Not at all | -- | -- |
| To some extent | 5 | 34 % |
| To large extent | 10 | 66 % |
| Total | 15 | 100% |

Source: Interview with the respondents

The table 1.3 reveals that 66 % respondent were of the view that the 74th Amendment have empowered women to a large extent. 34 % respondent felt that women were empowered to some extent. The respondents however were of the view that it was only for the reservation policy that had made possible for them to be elected. On the whole it can be said that the reservation for women has been a major breakthrough to empower the women. This is probably the pioneering step towards women empowerment.

1.4 Do you support reservation of seats for women?

| Category | No. of respondent | Percentage (%) |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 15 | 100% |
| No | -- | -- |
| Cannot Say | -- | -- |
| Total | 15 | 100% |

Source: Interview with the respondents

From the table 1.4 it was clear that respondents fully support the reservation of seats for women. The respondents were of the view that the reservation policy has created spaces for women in the local bodies. Before the implementation of reservation, the politics was dominated by male, but it has compelled men to leave the reserved seat for women. They also asserted the view that the seats for women should be reserved in State Assemblies and Parliament.

1.5 Do you

u support 50% reservation of seats for women?

| Category | No. of respondent | Percentage (%) |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 15 | 100% |
| No | -- | -- |
| Cannot Say | -- | -- |
| Total | 15 | 100% |

Source: Interview with the respondents

The table 1.5 shows that the respondents support 50% reservation of seats for women. They believe that it was correct to have 50% reservation for women. They were of the view that 50% reservation places women in front of men, after leaving her household chores in order to and make her own social position.

Table 1.6 Do you think that 74th CAA truly inclusive for women in local governance?

| Category | No. of respondent | Percentage (%) |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 15 | 100% |
| No | -- | -- |
| Cannot Say | -- | -- |
| Total | 15 | 100% |

Source: Interview with the respondents

From the table 1.6 it is clear that the entire women respondents are of the view that the 74th CAA is truly inclusive for women in local governance. The respondents reveal that CAA provides many specific standards to ensure decentralization and empowerment of urban local governments. The introduction of quota system for women is an important provision of CAA to make urban government more inclusive by ensuring the representation of women in local bodies.

Findings of the Study:

From the above discussion it is crystal clear that the 74th CAA has opened up spaces for women to enter into the decision making bodies of urban local governance. Through this Act, the elected women representatives of GMC have sensed a pragmatic change in their frame of mind and have become more optimistic and independent. The women have broken the fallacy of their own apathy that women are reluctant to enter politics by contesting and getting elected to urban local government. The elected women have attained a sense of empowerment by maintaining and controlling resources, officials and most of all, by challenging male counterparts.

The reservation policy for women can be considered as the most significant element that motivates and facilitates women to come forward into political life. It was only after the introduction of the 74th CAA, women are seen as the key actors in the process of development and reservation for them is a great move towards the emergence of leadership at the local level (Sharma, 2015,pg-

34). Majority of the women representatives in GMC were the first time entrants and all the 48 women members gained seats due to reservation policy. Political representation and leadership of women are very essential for good governance. The socio-economic and political status of women will remain insignificant unless and until women are actively involved in the decision making processes.

During the field study it has been found that most of the women members were aware about the 74th CAA but they had least information or knowledge about the basic provisions of the Act. Most of the elected women stated that CAA is truly inclusive for women in local governance as it has created spaces for marginalized women of the society to make a way into local self governance as seats are reserved for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes women. More importantly, this Act also provides one-third reservation for women for the post of Chairperson or Mayor. As the 74th CAA has been a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and their political representation and participation in the urban local governance in a meaningful manner, so most of the elected women are demanding 50 % reservation of seats for women in the Legislative and Parliamentary elections which they believe that it would help the nation to reach in a new height of development.

Conclusion:

The participation of women in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader field of governance across the globe. This study reveals the fact that the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act has created spaces in urban local governance for better and increased participation by women as group. Undoubtedly, women have attained a chance to actively participate in political field because of reservation policy which has actually boost women to attain self confidence, visibility and practical knowledge of political sphere. Sharma (2015) observes that by "virtue of their of participation and effecting changes in decision making, these elected women are, and will be, role models for the future generations and act as agents of transformation and change with a quest to create a more gendered friendly local government". Once elected, women need to make their voices heard instead of name sake members. If the women elected members are truly transformed as real decision makers at the local governance, India will certainly attain all round development and growth through inclusive governance.

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