Political Status of Women in Nagaland

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Introduction

One of the most trying issues in electoral studies in Nagaland is the discourse of women’s exclusion from the electoral process. There is a visible trend of men dominating the political terrain across the board, whereas the participation and representation of women in politics is invisible. This result in women being outside the centers of decision-making in terms of influence and status that is available to men. Women in Nagaland have been able to strengthen their political visibility only as voters. This paper contextualizes debates over the political status of women within the complex political and cultural space in Nagaland. The structural, institutional and situational barriers in the context of women’s political participation and representation are discussed.

Political Status of Women

Political status can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to this role of women (ICSSR Report of 1975). Indian constitution grants women full political rights, equal to those of men. Women can vote, run for office and hold ministerial and higher positions. According to the Reports of the Committee on Status of Women, three main indicators can be used to assess political status of women, viz., (i) participation in the political process as voters and candidates in elections; (ii) political attitudes such as awareness, commitment and involvement in politics and autonomy in political action and behaviour; and (iii) their impact on the political process.

Naga women have successfully pushed for increased participation in many fields of activities. However, one area where their participation is conspicuously missing is in the political arena. The context of their political status remains an open question. Relative to their share in the population, they remain outsiders in politics. Even after more than four decades of statehood, Nagaland is the only state which has never had a woman MLA. This reinforces the perception that electoral politics in Nagaland continue to be dominated by men. A domination that should not really be, because of the almost equal proportion of the two genders in the population. If half of the states enfranchised population is kept out of the political structures of the state, one cannot talk of democracy. The Naga women’s ongoing demand to participate equally in decision-making is based on the ground that representative democracy means equal opportunities for participation in politics of all citizens regardless of their sex. The parity representation of women is also indicative of justice and equality of the society.

Women as Voters and Candidates

Though elections in Nagaland have at times been held with evidence of wide spread electoral corruption, such as vote buying, vote rigging, voter intimidation and outbreaks of violence in polling places, official statistics indicate a general increase in the turnout of women voters. This shows that the women voters participate equally at the ballot box with men. This scenario positively encourages one to think that women in Nagaland are moving ahead in terms of participation in electoral process. Table 1 shows the percentage of men and women who voted at each of the Assembly Election that took place in a period of more than four decades (1964-2013). The first and the ninth Assembly Election has been left out of the analysis due to non-availability of data by gender.
A number of general inferences can be made from Table 1. The data reflects a marked fluctuation in the number of women registered as voters, between high and low, in each successive Assembly Election in Nagaland. The data also shows that women voters tend to vote more than the male voters. In eight out of the ten Assembly Election under study women voters outnumbered the male voters. This shows that the male politicians are voted to power on the women vote. This fact also leads one to assume that, if female voters vote for female candidates, they can be voted to political office.

The reason why it is important for women to be elected to political office is not only for reason of parity. Women elected to political office can generate interest in politics among women. This is substantiated by a number of research findings which report that visible female candidates can trigger political interest on a wide range of political activities among women (David E. Campbell and Christina Wolbrecht, 2006). Where there are more female politicians in office, women are more likely to discuss and participate in politics as they become more inspired by the activities of visible role models (Wolbrecht and David Campbell, 2007). An emulative mechanism might exert some positive effects. Visible women in politics might function as role models and carry a kind of symbolic significance-sending the message to women citizens that politics is an inclusive domain, open to them (Burns et al, 2001).

However, women’s high participation in voting has not been accompanied by a corresponding rise in number of women as contestants and elected representatives. Electoral success continues to elude women.
While improvements in women’s educational and professional status may be a stimulus for women’s empowerment, this is clearly not sufficient to win elected office. In the electoral history of Nagaland, spanning a period of more than four decades, fifteen women candidates have contested, but all were repeatedly defeated. The number of women candidates contesting for the State Legislature has also been extremely discouraging. It has just been 0.76 per cent of the total number of male candidates. A better comparative assessment can be had by looking at Table 2, which highlights the number of male and female candidates contesting in the Assembly Election from 1969-2013.

Table 2. Male/Female Contestants in State Assembly Elections, 1969-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Election</th>
<th>Total No of seats</th>
<th>Total No of contestants who contested election</th>
<th>Difference of % Male/Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There are many reasons why electoral success elude women. Political parties in Nagaland accord low priority to women’s candidature. Women often find their efforts to break into politics marginalized by the failure of the parties to support their viability as candidates. Though political parties have women wings, women are often not recruited to run for elective office. Another practice of the political party which marginalizes women from politics is that, those few women aspirants they nominate are given ticket in constituencies where the party has less chance of winning.

Another reason is that voters in patriarchal societies are likely to perceive women candidates as less qualified than men to run for public office. The effect of a gendered socialization should not be underestimated. Generally, gender-role stereotyping is still prevalent and accepted in our society. Women and men are conditioned by society to play different roles. Women’s main role is largely deemed to be in the household whereas leadership role is conceptualized as a preserve of men in our society. They are projected as leaders and women the followers. In fact politics and women are seen as each other’s anti thesis. Therefore, the electorate as a whole may perceive women as less qualified and less suited for politics than men and almost invariably vote for the male candidate. Such prevailing attitude towards women contributes to the lack of confidence that many voters have in women candidate and has become a major barrier to the election of women to elective office. Therefore, those few women who may have an interest to contest may be reluctant to do so and if they do contest, they may fail to attract sufficient support to win.

Barriers to Women’s Political Participation and Representation

Despite the fact that modern system of governance has been ushered in since Nagaland got Statehood on 1st December, 1963, age old
traditional practices and values prevails. In Nagaland, patriarchy appears to control all institutions of the society, be it the modern or the traditional institutions.

Political parties in Nagaland appear to be male dominated. They have not genuinely taken up the issue of political participation by women, either inside the party through leadership posts or outside the party through candidacy on electoral lists. This is reflected by the near total absence of women in party leadership and thereby influence over party decision. The few women members are largely auxiliaries and supporters of male leadership. There also exists a gendered division of labour within the party structure. The activities of women in party organization are more or less restricted to auxiliary and support roles. Political parties frequently mobilize them to support the party men. Besides casting their votes, their electoral activities is just confined to preparing meals for party events or home visitation, which in many cases, are to distribute material goods to the prospective voters. Women committees exist just for the purported purpose of activating female voters. It does not develop women political cadres.

So long as the political parties refrain from supporting and promoting women’s candidacies, the representation of women will continue to lag behind men. Therefore it is important to examine who actually controls the nomination process. One of the reasons for the historically high women’s representation in the Scandinavian countries is that women’s organizations have consistently asked the question: who controls the nomination process? Subsequently they have demanded 50 per cent women on the nomination committees.

Moreover, the traditional institutions around which the Naga social and political life revolves have never recognized the rights of women as primary decision makers. A case in point is the Naga Hoho, considered as the apex decision-making body of the Naga people and is represented by different Naga tribes. Till date it has no woman representative. At the grassroots level, the Village Council is the highest decision-making body. It is represented by all the clans in the village. However, traditionally women are still not allowed to take part in the decision-making of the Village Council. These institutions, modern as well as traditional, are considered to be democratic bodies, which are supposed to be a means for all citizens to be equally represented or involved.

Unlike their male counterparts, women do not receive positive reinforcement from the society at large for participation in politics. Naga women live with an identity of being marginal especially in politics. Men dictate if not control the public spaces for women and this becomes quiet prominent when the subject is politics. The dominance of power in dictating who participates in politics is clearly evident by the opposition to the 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in local bodies – Municipal and Town Councils- on grounds of cultural rationales and unexamined assumptions. The ongoing opposition to the bill is only one example to illustrate the extent to which women’s right to participate in politics is often abused if not sterilized by the so called ‘cultural guards’ of our society. This indicates the existence of biases against women taking part in electoral activities.

If the definition of democracy allows for participation of different groups in the society, then it cannot thrive by excluding women both in the context of participation as well as representation. Therefore, in the context of Nagaland, what seems debatable is whether democratic process can flourish in the current dispensation, where politics is characterized as male, excluding women. Though women in are seen as equal members of the community, they are not held equal as political subjects. Equality is hardly achieved when some groups have so much leverage than others (Anne Philips,1995). Since women in Nagaland represent almost half of the population of the state, if they do not enjoy an equal political status with men, both as participants as well as representatives, the society can hardly be called democratic.

Conclusion

Thus, it appears that despite the introduction of modern democratic systems for more than four decades and notwithstanding the legal provisions of equality enshrined in the Indian constitution, political status of Naga women has not improved. The political status of Naga women remains by
and large low-profiled and unrecognized. They enjoy the right to vote and to be elected to decision-making positions, but these legal provisions have meant little by way of enhancing their political status. Without a meaningful participation and representation of women in politics, built on the principles of parity, it will be impossible to build a democratic civil society.

Therefore the barriers to women gaining entry into elective office lie on how society as a whole perceives women in public role. In fact, systematic cross national evidence has shown that egalitarian attitudes towards women as political leaders are strongly related to the proportion of women elected to public office (Pippa Norris and R. Inglehart, 2001). Women are more likely to emerge as candidates in states that established an early pattern of electing women to the state legislature, support women’s participation in public affairs, and do not have a tradition of sex-discrimination in income, or gender disparities in educational achievement (David Hill, 1981). Therefore, a more egalitarian public portrayal relating to women’s political participation may plausibly influence both whether women in Nagaland are willing to come forward as candidates for elective office and whether they can win.

References


