

Women Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Governance of North-east India: with special reference to Nagaon district of Assam

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Abstract:

The scope and effects of women's participation in local governing institutions are examined in this research. Using primary and secondary data sources, the study employs a descriptive and analytical research approach with a focus on four governing bodies: the Urban Local Bodies, Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat, and Zilla Parishad. The results show significant differences in women's involvement at various levels of government. With 45.20% female members, Gaon Panchayats have the largest representation, followed by Zilla Parishads (27.50%), Urban Local Bodies (29.20%), and Anchalik Panchayats (28.00%). This pattern demonstrates that while gender inclusion is more pronounced at the grassroots level of governance, female engagement is lower at higher administrative levels. The research emphasizes the need of sociopolitical support and policy initiatives to strengthen women's leadership positions, particularly in decision-making processes.

Keywords:

Women Leadership, Gender Mainstreaming, Local Governance, Political Participation, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women Empowerment, Gender Representation, Decentralization

1. Introduction

In places like northeast India that are multi-ethnic and culturally varied, women's leadership in governance has become crucial to creating inclusive and egalitarian communities. Traditional practices and patriarchal norms have historically shaped the region's governance systems, often limiting women's involvement in decision-making. Nonetheless, attempts at gender mainstreaming have accelerated in recent decades due to the implementation of constitutional and regulatory provisions as well as increased awareness of gender parity.

Women have started to express their participation in local bodies, civil society positions, and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Assam, especially in the Nagaon district. This has helped to promote more representative government. In addition to evaluating how gender mainstreaming policies are changing governance practices in the district and the larger northeastern area, this research intends to investigate the accomplishments, difficulties, and influence of women leaders in Nagaon.

1.1 Women Leadership in North-east India

In North-east India, women have long faced obstacles to formal political activity, despite being essential to social and economic institutions. A distinctive socio-political context for assessing women's leadership today is provided by the region's unique examples of matrilineal customs and community leadership, which empower women in informal government. Broader female political presence is nonetheless constrained by structural issues such cultural stigma, lack of political mentoring, and education, despite these historical advantages.

1.2 Gender Mainstreaming in Governance: A Case of Nagaon District

The district of Nagaon provides a microcosmic perspective on the use of gender mainstreaming in practice and policy. After constitutional reforms and state-led gender equality programs, women's participation in PRIs, NGOs, and local government institutions has increased. However, because of institutional and sociocultural limitations, this inclusion is often only symbolic, and real empowerment is still restricted. Gaining insight into these processes in Nagaon facilitates the identification of deficiencies that may be addressed and the development of more successful gender-responsive governance models for northeastern India.

1.3 Women Empowerment in Assam

North East India consists of eight states, including Assam. Geographically speaking, it is the second biggest state in the region after Arunachal Pradesh, and it has the greatest population. The state is falling behind the rest of the nation despite having abundant natural resources and a strong cultural heritage. The state's socioeconomic structure has not supported general development. Being a multiethnic state with many cultural roots, it has endured ethnic conflict and insurgency over the past thirty years, endangering not only its economy but also its social cohesion. Women suffer the most as a result of the procedure. Even if Assam and the rest of the region are free from societal ills like dowries, sati pratha, female feticide, and Several gender gap studies have shown that, in addition to infanticide, there are other types of gender discrimination due to the presence of tribal and indigenous culture. Contrary to popular belief, Assamese women are not as disadvantaged as women in other parts of the nation. As compared to other states in the nation, women's status in Assam is

rather worse. A study of 16 major Indian states' differences in gender achievement placed Assam at tenth place. The state has more gender disparity than all of India, according to. Out of the 32 states and union territories of the nation, the state came in at number 29. The state trailed behind Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur. In light of these considerations, a thorough investigation of women's position and state empowerment was considered.

2. Literature review

Scholarly discussions on women's participation in governance in India have evolved from examining welfare-oriented approaches to analysing structural empowerment and political agency. Early debates largely focused on women's socio-economic status, while later studies engaged more directly with institutional reforms such as decentralisation and political reservations.

Mahanta and Nayak (2013) examine gender inequality in North-East India using socio-economic indicators and argue that although the region is often perceived as relatively progressive, structural disparities persist in education, employment, and political representation. Their analysis highlights that improvements in literacy and health do not automatically translate into political empowerment. Similarly, *Nayak and Mahanta (2009)* emphasise that empowerment in Assam remains uneven, particularly in rural areas where patriarchal norms continue to shape women's public roles.

Das (2014). in her study of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam, observes that constitutional reservations have enhanced women's numerical presence in governance. However, she notes that effective participation is often limited by socio-cultural constraints and insufficient administrative capacity. This distinction between descriptive representation and substantive participation is central to understanding the limits of decentralised gender reforms.

Shivakumar (1996). through his analysis of the Gender Related Development Index (GDI), demonstrates interstate disparities in gender development across India. Assam's ranking in comparative studies suggests moderate progress but persistent structural inequalities. *Banerjee (2015)* further links regional disparities in human development to variations in governance capacity, indicating that inclusive policy frameworks require institutional commitment beyond formal mandates.

Choudhury and Kumar (2022). conceptualise women's marginalisation in North-East India within the framework of social exclusion. They argue that even where women experience relative mobility in social and economic life, political authority remains embedded in patriarchal power structures.

Das (2013). compares the status of women in the North-East with the national average and concludes that the perceived advantage of the region is marginal and varies across indicators.

Nath and Sen (2015). Empirical studies specific to Nagaon district provide micro-level insights. Analyse women's empowerment using a fuzzy set approach and find that while mobility indicators show some improvement, decision-making autonomy within households and communities remains limited.

Nath and Dutta (2017), focusing on rural women, demonstrate a positive correlation between occupational status and empowerment but report overall low empowerment levels. These findings suggest that economic participation alone is insufficient to guarantee political agency.

Kalita (2021). study on Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Kathiatoli Block of Nagaon district highlights the role of microfinance and collective organisation in enhancing women's socio-economic confidence. However, she also notes sustainability challenges and uneven political translation of economic gains into leadership roles.

2.1 Research gap

The study gap, according to the paper presented, is the lack of investigation into how women's greater involvement in governance structures, specifically in Assam's Nagaon district—translates into real empowerment beyond symbolic engagement. The effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies and the true effects of these changes on women's decision-making power, mobility, and socio-political influence are frequently not thoroughly examined in studies, despite the fact that they recognize the increased representation and roles of women in local institutions and Self-Help Groups. Therefore, targeted studies that assess the qualitative and quantitative results of women's empowerment and leadership initiatives in the area are required.

2.2 Research Objectives

- To assess the extent of women's representation in different tiers of local governance in Nagaon district.
- To analyse whether representation reflects meaningful participation.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in decentralised governance structures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

With a particular emphasis on the Nagaon district of Assam, this study uses a descriptive and analytical research approach to investigate the state and function of women's leadership and gender mainstreaming in North-east India's governmental systems. The study intends to demonstrate the degree of women's impact, engagement, and representation in local governing organizations.

3.2 Area of Study

The study was carried out in Nagaon district, Assam, which has many levels of local self-governance, such as Urban Local Bodies, Anchalik Panchayats, Gaon Panchayats, and Zilla Parishads. These governance frameworks, which serve as the cornerstone of decentralized administration, were chosen in order to evaluate the gender distribution of decision-making positions.

3.3 Primary Data:

Collected through structured interviews and questionnaires administered to elected women representatives and key officials in local governance institutions (Zilla Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat, Gaon Panchayat, and Urban Local Bodies). Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) and field visits were conducted to understand challenges, roles, and influence of women in leadership.

3.4 Secondary Data:

gathered from government papers, census data, policy documents, scholarly journals, gender statistics from the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Assam, and official records of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

3.5 Sampling Technique

To choose the district's female leaders and governing bodies, a purposive sampling technique was used. The sample consisted of:

- 11 women from the district-level Zilla Parishad;
- 23 women from the block-level Anchalik Panchayat; and 95 women from the village-level Gaon Panchayat.
- 19 women from municipal-level Urban Local Bodies As a consequence,
- 148 elected female members made up the whole sample.

3.6 Tools of Data Collection

- Formalized surveys for numerical information.
- Timetables for qualitative insights via interviews.
- Checklists for observations to gauge attendance at meetings and decision-making.
- To examine patterns in women's representation, comparative data tables and graphical representation (bar charts) are used.

3.7 Data Analysis

Comparative methods and percentage analysis were used to examine the gathered data. The degree of women's engagement at various levels of governance was interpreted using tabular and graphical techniques (as shown in the findings section). The research primarily looked at the extent of gender mainstreaming in institutional governance and identified trends, advancements, and discrepancies in gender representation.

4. Result:

Table 1 Representation of Women in Different Local Governance Bodies

Governance Body	Total Members	Women Members	Percentage of Women (%)
Zilla Parishad (District)	40	11	27.50%
Anchalik Panchayat (Block)	82	23	28.00%
Gaon Panchayat (Village)	210	95	45.20%
Urban Local Bodies (Municipal)	65	19	29.20%

The representation of women in different local governing bodies is shown in the table and bar graph that go with it. Zilla Parishad (District), Anchalik Panchayat (Block), Gaon Panchayat (Village), and Urban Local Bodies (Municipal) are the four groups that comprise the data. The number of women members, the overall number of members, and the proportion of women in each body are all included in the table. Notably, 95 out of 210 members (45.20%) are women, making Gaon Panchayat (Village) the group with the largest number and proportion of female members. However, with just 11 out of 40 members being female, the Zilla Parishad has the lowest proportion of women's representation (27.50%). This data is graphically complemented by the bar graph, which provides a comparative picture of gender representation across different governing bodies by utilizing color-coded bars to reflect total members, female members, and the proportion of women.

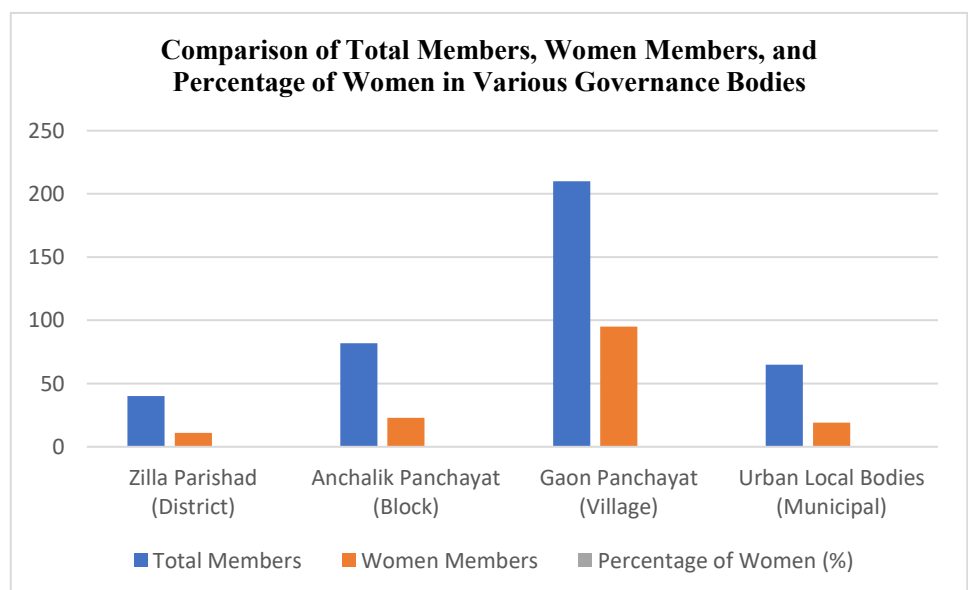


Figure 1 Comparison of Total Members, Women Members, and Percentage of Women in Various Governance Bodies

5. Discussion

Significant differences in the representation of women at the various governmental levels in Nagaon district are reflected in the data collected and examined for this research. With 45.20% of its members being women, the Gaon Panchayat (Village level) is the most inclusive governing body. This might be ascribed to constitutional provisions like the 73rd Amendment, which have promoted women's grassroots political engagement. However, Zilla Parishads and Anchalik Panchayats have comparatively smaller percentages of female members, suggesting that women's participation tends to decrease when higher levels of administration take control. Although the Urban Local Bodies also exhibit a considerable degree of inclusiveness (29.20%), gender parity is still not attained. While reservation rules have opened possibilities, women still face obstacles including gender prejudice, restricted decision-making ability, and a lack of institutional support, according to interviews and focus groups with elected women representatives. Furthermore, cultural norms and public perceptions continue to significantly restrict women's ability to hold leadership positions in government. According to the results, in order to facilitate the effective engagement of women leaders, institutional procedures must be combined with awareness campaigns and capacity-building projects.

6. Conclusion

According to the study's findings, genuine gender mainstreaming is still an issue even though reservation regulations have helped women join Nagaon district's local governing institutions. Though the decreasing numbers in Zilla Parishads and other higher-level organizations reflect institutional and cultural constraints that impede the development of women's leadership, the increasing presence of women in Gaon Panchayats shows improvement at the grassroots level. A multifaceted strategy that includes gender-sensitive training, policy reinforcement, and changes in cultural attitudes is necessary to address these inequities. In addition to guaranteeing more inclusive decision-making, empowering women in governance fortifies democratic processes across the board. As a result, consistent work is required to move women in governance from only having a numerical representation to having a meaningful role and leadership.

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