SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary:

The present study is concerned with one of the most important issues of present politics that is the political participation of women. Women's access to power and decision-making in the public sphere is considered important for achieving gender equality and therefore the development paradigms have incorporated political empowerment in its strategies. The belief was that women would choose policies that would improve the status of women, impacting gender power relations and transform the very nature of political power by making it more honest and accountable.

The thesis began with questions arising out of my initial puzzlement about whether a simple reservation of seats for women would actually be an initial step for the empowerment of women. In the ensuing chapters I have outlined the historical, political and socio-cultural influences that have impacted so heavily upon women's role in panchayats. I have analysed the status of women's participation as it was found during field work taking the cases of the Kamrup district as a case example.

Panchayats today, provide the institutional framework to the concept of democratic decentralization in India and have been envisaged as the most effective instruments of realizing the goals economic development and empowerment of the marginalized sections of the society. Participation of women in these grass root institutions has been considered essential for enabling them to effectively participate in the political processes and to influence decision-making. It is regarded as a march towards building an equalitarian social order.
and a means for realizing the development goals for women. Reservation for women has opened the door to revolutionary changes of a political, social and cultural nature. In the specific context of rural Assam, the reservation of seats for women can be considered as a new bold experiment in local democracy, social justice and participatory development.

Women and political participation:

The question of equal political rights for women emerged in the West mainly because the promise of equality made by the democratic revolutions of the 17th and 18th century had excluded women. In other parts of the world like in India this question was raised in the context of the anti-imperialist movement and the struggle against social evils mainly pertaining to women.

Feminist political theory is marked by intense internal debates and it is more appropriate to talk about feminisms in the plural. The point of convergence amongst feminists is the belief that women are placed in an inferior position in society and this hierarchy is based on gender which is a social construct and has little to do with the biological difference between men and women. Some of the key issues in feminist thought are patriarchy, the sex/gender distinction and the private/public dichotomy. Different feminists have different positions on these issues.

Due to the work of feminist scholars there has been a growing sensitivity to gender. Economists have also brought to light the nature and significance of the work done by women which remains invisible and is not taken into account. The pioneering work of Ester Boserup revealed that women were victims rather than beneficiaries of the modernization process and brought about a change in the development discourse on women. Increasing pressure on the governments and the United Nations by the women's movement, consisting of non-government organizations provided the impetus for the UN International Women's Decade.
(1976-85) and several International Conferences followed on issues around women's status and role in the national and international political economy. These conferences have raised important questions on various matters like gender equality in decision-making and access to resources, gender balance in political representation, sexual and reproductive rights and freedom from violence. Further these conferences tried to get the participating governments to commit to putting into place institutional mechanisms for ensuring gender justice at various levels.

With the publication of the Human Development Reports and the propagation of Amartya Sen's theory of human capabilities, enhancement of human capabilities became the new slogan. It was argued that marginalized groups such as the old, children and women have special difficulties in achieving their capabilities. Therefore participation of such marginalized groups in decision-making is seen to be as important as the eventual outcomes.

The introduction of gender quotas became an important instrument to bring about gender parity in the Legislative bodies all over the world. In India reservation for women in the state legislatures and the Parliament generated much heated debates and are yet to come through. But quotas for women were introduced the local self bodies both rural and urban without generating much hullabaloo.

Women and Panchayats:

In the pre-independence period panchayats were a village level institute to solve common problems and arrive at consensus on important social issues. Though women did not have decision-making powers they could avail these institutions for justice. During the British period the Panchayats were made statutory bodies and entrusted with many functions but women were completely left out of these institutions.
Gandhiji had full faith in the efficacy of panchayats as the basic of governance and had also visualized an equal role for both men and women in the functioning of panchayats. Surprisingly the panchayats did not find a place in the Draft Constitution and the Chairman of the Drafting Committee had a very disparaging view about the Panchayats. Ultimately, panchayats were included as Article 40 in the Directive Principles of State Policy. It was left to discretion of the State Governments to implement the article according to their wish.

In 1952 Panchayati Raj was introduced in many states including Assam. Since independent India had Universal Adult Franchise, women were free to vote or contest in elections but very few women contested or got elected to panchayats. It was the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee which recommended that two women be nominated to the Panchayats and since then in many parts of India women were recruited to the panchayats by cooptation than by election. Later many states had initiated reforms in their Panchayati Raj Acts to make reservations for women. But, it was only by the 73rd Amendment that uniformity in the structure and functions of panchayats was made throughout the country.

Local Self-Government in Assam:

Assam has a tradition of holding local assemblies like the Mel, Bormel, Rajmel in local areas to discuss local problems both developmental and social. Later after Sankardeva we have Namghars and Satras performing this role in a systematic manner. These have become institutions where village people sit down and discuss local problems and also try to find solutions. After the British annexation of Assam, the history of local self government in Assam becomes similar to that of the rest of India. After independence Assam was one of the first states in India to establish Panchayati Raj Institutions. Since then, many important decisions were taken, implemented, amended and also repealed. Ultimately the 73rd Amendment ushered in a new era of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state.
Implementation of the Assam Panchayati Raj Act of 1994:

Though, women in Assam played a very important role in the Freedom Movement and in many socio-political movements after independence, their access to seats of political power at the national, state and local levels has been extremely limited. Insecurity of life due to the violence caused by insurgency, lack of a suitable social environment, underestimation of the abilities of women by political parties are some of the reasons cited for this kind of situation in the state.

Along with the rest of the country, the Assam State Legislative Assembly passed the Assam Panchayat Act 1994 in conformity with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in its Budget Session on 9th April 1994. The elections to the Panchayati Raj Institutions under the Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1994 were held in December 2001. It was revealed that almost all the formalities relating to the formation of village panchayats, identification of constituencies to be reserved for women, were carried out at the block panchayat level without involving the local people. The information regarding the village panchayats to be reserved for women was divulged very late, therefore people were confused and many well educated women could not contest. In the Kamrup district the number of seats reserved for women were 409 for General Women, 39 for Scheduled Caste Women and 40 for Scheduled Tribe Women. A few women have also been elected from general seats and seats reserved for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe in general.

The Assam Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 brought all the 29 subjects enlisted in the Eleventh Schedule under the functional domain of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. But both funds and functionaries have remained in the exclusive domain of the state government. It was only on July 25, 2007 that the state government transferred 23 subjects of ten departments to the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
The Gaon Panchayats are responsible for the preparation of annual plans for development of their area but in practice these plans are nothing but budgets enlisting certain schemes to be implemented in their respective areas.

In the preparation as well as implementation of the schemes the Gaon Panchayats are heavily dependent on the technical persons of the Block offices and many women presidents have complained about the high-handedness of these officers. The technical staff of the Block office has to assist the panchayats in the preparation of the Action Plan but they are not accountable to the panchayats. The statutory provision for constituting the various standing committees has not been fulfilled in most of the Gaon Panchayats.

The Assam State Finance Commission strongly recommended that the panchayats generate their own resources, but there are several constraints before the panchayats and their resource base is very small. Another important point to be noted is that a few panchayats can pay honorarium for about 8 months a year, some 4 months and some none at all. Such disparity within a district is very disturbing. This has also led to corruption as women openly talk about getting commission on the work being done and taking it to be their due.

Though the Constitution has ensured the continuity of the panchayats by making panchayat elections compulsory, such rules have been violated in Assam. The term of the present Panchayati Raj bodies expired on December 2006. The high Court had directed the state government to hold polls by October 31, 2007. But the spokesperson of the state government revealed that due to the flood situation in the state elections would be held only in December 2007. Subsequently elections were held and the process completed by January 2008.

The provisions of the Act have been implemented in words but not in spirit. There is a huge gap between the democratic ideals as proclaimed by the 73rd amendment and the local practice.
Socio-economic and political Background:

The socio-economic background of the women representatives has revealed information about age, educational qualifications, occupation of husbands, family background, children etc. Age-wise breakup of the respondents show that majority of them belong to the middle age group indicating that women with grown up children are relatively free to participate in politics.

Most of the women representatives live in joint or extended families. The average size of family is five members.

As regards educational qualification of the women members' majority have studied up to the middle or senior school level and three of the women representatives are graduates.

Landholding is an important source of power in the rural areas. However, a majority of women members belong to families with marginal land holdings. More than 40% of the households of women have non-agricultural sources of income. A majority of the families enjoy a fairly high degree of economic wellbeing and also wider contacts with urban areas.

The study reveals that among the socio-economic attributes such as age education caste, annual household income only annual household income and education had a positive relationship with role performance. The participation of members belonging to lower socio-economic background is found to be lower. Education and economic well-being gives a sense of confidence and encouragement to participate. Similar observations have also been made in studies conducted in different states of India.

The political background of 37% of the women members' show that fathers, mothers, uncles, brothers in their parental home have been involved in some form of political activity or the other. As regards the socio-political
background of the husbands' home 61% of the women's members had relatives engaged in political activity, mainly their husbands or father-in-law. A background in politics and family support are important factors behind women's entry into politics.

**Reasons for Contesting:**

It is observed that around 99% of the women representatives have been elected from seats specially reserved for women in all categories.

It is also significant that for very few i.e. only 8.28% was the decision to contest their own.

Once elected, 75% reported that service to society as a whole would be their main objective, for only 15% it was to particularly address women's problems and the rest had nothing significant to offer.

**Community's Response to Women's participation:**

Though male members and villagers were at first cynical to women's entry they are now reconciled to it. Interaction with members of the village community revealed that a high premium is placed on education. People believed that if women are educated there is no holding back. They strongly believed that educated women should shoulder such responsibility. People are divided in their opinion on the efficacy of the women members. In the panchayats where women members are active people have a more favorable opinion.

During field work one thing was very obvious that political communication is influenced by the fact that citizens and leaders are of the same sex. Women in villages with women presidents were more visible in the panchayat
Office with a request for a favour or to lodge a complaint. The fact that the president is a women increases the involvement of women. Also when the number of women is increased in decision-making bodies it becomes easier to be a politician and the public perceptions of female politicians change.

Participation of women in the activities of the Gaon Panchayat:

Women's participation in the activities of the Gaon Panchayat was found to vary between the different Gaon Panchayats. Women belonging to the Scheduled Tribes were more active than the women belonging to other social groups. Again, participation of Muslim women especially from the Char regions was found to be very unsatisfactory.

Participation of women residing in villages well accessible by roads and within easy reach of the Block office was found to be more than that of women residing in villages without proper roads and transport facilities. With regard to the members perception of their own role most of them had vague idea of what was expected of them and what their powers and responsibilities were. Only 43% members attend meetings regularly. And even amongst those who attend participation in discussions was found to be very negligible. The women presidents are heavily dependent on the panchayat secretaries for getting their work done.

Most of the Gaon Panchayats are involved in the implementation of SGSY, SGRY, IAY, NSAP, and schemes under the 11th and 12th Finance Commission awards. These centrally sponsored schemes happen to be the mainstay of the Panchayats and there is very little scope for planning. Identification of beneficiaries for the different development programmes is the primary function of the Gaon Sabha. But it was found that in most cases it was done by the local MLA with the help of the BDO. This dampens the zeal and enthusiasm of the members. The bureaucracy dominates the elected representatives at all levels.
Role of Political Parties:

The elections to the panchayats were held on a party basis and most members expressed strong party loyalties. There have also been instances where members have changed political parties or joined one after being elected. But no political party has taken up the task of systematically imparting training to their women members. The party headquarters also do not have a list of the elected members of their party to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The process of giving party nominations is also highly questionable. There is also undue interference of the party leaders in the affairs of the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Views of the women representatives on women's development and gender rights:

Development meant to the women members, the government schemes. Construction of roads, tube-wells, buildings, distributing different kinds of asses to the weaker sections (subsidized rice, threads, looms, sanitary ware etc.) were the only things they could think of when asked about development. They feel that the finances of the panchayats are inadequate as a result of which a lot of demands remained unfulfilled.

Women did know about the gender issues but not many issues were addressed by them. Though they were aware about the increasing domestic violence against women they consider it beyond the purview of the panchayats to take action on them. Many have however participated in protests against army atrocities on women.

In some panchayats there have been some interventions against alcoholism and fines and punishment were imposed on alcoholics but such activism is rare.
Very few women members were actively engaged in organizing women’s self help groups and participating in the health and educational programmes of the district.

Training needs:

Since most of the members are first time entrants into public offices, training is of critical importance. But there have been no coherent and integrated training programmes for the representatives. There have been sporadic efforts at training by the NIRD, SIRD, and the Extension Training Centres at Kahikuchi and Hajo. It is found that most of these trainings do not last for more than two days and therefore not very effective for the novices. Most of the members want the training to be held in the Block. For many traveling to Guwahati to attend training means having to walk miles simply to catch a bus. The need for training was deeply felt by all the women members and those who had attended trainings appreciated their benefits. The women particularly mentioned that training had helped them to acquire information on many issues like the Panchayati Raj Act, rules and regulations of the panchayat and also the ability to speak in public.

The following is a recapitulation of the empirical findings of the entire work:

1. Working for the community is the major motivating force of the women members. Only for 15% of the women representatives had women issues as their main priority.

2. They hold remarkably progressive views on questions of gender and patriarchy but are reluctant to take any measures to change the situation.

3. The movement for separate states by separate ethnic groups has consolidated the group identity of women.
4. Priorities and concerns expressed by the women representatives indicate the importance given to infrastructural issues.

5. It was obvious during the field work that some Scheduled Tribe women members were particularly more active than their counterparts in other gaon panchayats; they demonstrated greater mobility, better oratory skills and greater self-confidence.

6. Women members strongly felt the need for training. They wanted training to be held at the block level so that they did not have to travel much to attend the training programmes.

7. Women Panchayat Presidents were victims of no confidence motions. Mainly because of their illiteracy, ignorance of official procedures, and lack of experience in dealing with financial matters, they fall prey to the unscrupulous elements.

8. Women who had prior exposure in the public sphere were more successful in their role— they are former teachers, midwives, social workers, anganwadi workers.

9. When a panchayat has a women President there are more women approaching the Panchayat for benefits.

10. Women residing in villages well accessible by roads were more active than women living in interior villages.

11. The better educated women were playing a more effective role and were given more respect than their less educated counterparts.

12. The women presidents were better qualified than the ordinary members and belonged to better socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

13. The change in status and empowerment was perceived to be more at the level of Women presidents than ordinary women members.
14. The disparity in terms of resources between the Gaon panchayats within a single Community Development Block was very striking. This is evident from the number of months a panchayat can afford to pay honorarium to its members.

15. Corruption charges though highlighted in the media and CAG Reports seems to have little impact on the views of both male and female functionaries. Since they hardly get any honorarium they take it to be their due.

16. No NGO or women organization has been involved in imparting training to the specifically to the women members like in many other districts of Assam.

17. There is no involvement of political parties in training women in their duties and responsibilities.

18. Panchayats and women members are not playing an effective role in the formation self-help groups.

19. The trainings held have not been very effective in imparting the knowledge about the powers and functions, duties and responsibilities of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to the women members.

20. It was very obvious that the members find it difficult to overcome the bureaucratic strong hold and the bureaucrats do not like to function under the Panchayat leadership.

21. Party politics is damaging these institutions and increasing factionalism at the local level. There is a big tussle for the spoils of the office.

22. Large sections particularly the middle classes and the educated classes do not consider panchayats relevant to their lives. This was obvious while attending a few Gaon Sabha meetings and during visits to the Panchayat offices.
23. The panchayats have not been able to effectively mobilize the women to attain self-sufficiency through the employment generation programmes or Self groups; therefore their dependency on the state for support has increased. A large number of women are seen visiting Panchayat offices and Block offices for getting subsidized rice, pensions, threads etc.

24. The political climate that prevails in some gaon panchayats characterized by lack of unity, corruption, an incapacitated fund less panchayat, and a heavy controlling bureaucracy prevents women's effective participation.

25. Various interests like politically ambitious male relatives or political parties can use women for their own purposes.

Conclusion:

The scope of our discussion comprises three inter-related elements namely, gender, empowerment and democratic political participation. In exploring how women's political participation through the support of a quota system, operates as a tool for empowerment of women in rural Kamrup our study guides us to a reflective consideration of the multiple factors affecting women's empowerment initiatives. For women, household obligations and childcare responsibilities significantly limit their participation in public life. Other constraining factors may include family interference, political interference, lack of awareness, inexperience, lack of resources, lack of adequate education, lack of mobility, lack of means and costs of travel to panchayat office, as well as lack of notification and timings of meetings. All these constraints coalesce with women's power relations in the household and thus shape women's opportunities for participation in the Gaon Panchayats of rural Kamrup.

In the context of seat reservations there is an implication of power in politics. Reservation brings people who are outside the decision-making process into it. Thereby the marginalized sections of the society like women, in this context,
have the opportunity both to participate in decision-making as well affect the decisions. However, acquisition of power in politics by itself does not affect the cultural morals and values that exist outside the political structures. And therefore the women who have entered these power structures face great difficulty as they have internalized the notions of gender subordination and find it hard to get out of it.

When quotas were introduced in the Scandinavian countries, women already had a fairly high representation in the legislative bodies, had high levels of education, were gainfully engaged in labour participation and had strong support from women's groups and political parties. In this part of the world, women with low levels of education, very low work participation, great disparities in income and development and almost no support from women's groups and political parties have great difficulty in perceiving themselves as having the capacity and right to act and exert influence.

Therefore, as a means towards empowerment, women's political participation as facilitated by a quota system must be substantially strengthened by the entire facilitators of women's empowerment starting from government machineries for women such as the Department of Women and Child, Women Study Centers, Women's Movement, The Social Welfare Boards, non-government organizations (NGOs), women organizations and political parties. In those places where such networks are active women have been able to play a more effective role. It has been found that in the Kamrup district such networks have been abysmally low or non-existent.

The presence of 33% women has not led to the development of a critical mass capable of changing the norms of politics from its masculine moorings. Instead women have been socialized into male political styles and priorities or have become captive to them. The focus of the panchayats have been more on livelihood related issues without crossing the precincts of women's perceived domestic roles hence there has been very little effort to address women's strategic
gender needs. Local planning and development initiatives have been relegated to the background and panchayats really work as an extended arm of the government to implement programmes designed at the top and achieve quotas fixed for each scheme at a higher level. The entire system is rigidly structured leaving very little room for local level initiative. This is not to say that women with their present levels of qualifications and experience are equipped to deal with such matters. This calls for more capacity building initiatives not only by the state but also by the NGOs', women's groups and political parties as well.

The 'critical mass' of women in political life increases the potential for the transformation of gender consciousness but does not guarantee it. Numbers alone do not indicate that the situation for women has improved. There are certain norms, values and everyday practices that legislation cannot change. It is very important that those women who occupy the positions of power are aware of these problems. If actions taken by women in power do not benefit women outside of politics then legislative change provides a limited form of agency for women. Herein lies the importance of the combination of the "politics of presence" and "politics of ideas" as pointed out by Anne Phillips.

Women enter these institutions as members of a particular, class, caste, community, religion, and ethnicity. This significantly affects their role. In a plural society like that of Kamrup with vast socio-economic disparities, women have always been politically mobilized on the basis of class, caste, community, religion, and ethnicity and it is difficult to undo such consciousness.

A perusal of the empirical evidence would give the impression that the whole exercise of giving opportunity to women has not been effectively utilized by them. The elected women are not seeing themselves as empowered and therefore do not have the confidence to assert themselves. There are also others who do not know what their powers are and therefore the community also does not perceive them to be worthy or capable of leadership. But one should remember that most women are first time entrants into this system and five years is too
short a period to judge them so unsympathetically. One thing however is very clear, that the 73rd Amendment Act, even it is generated from an understanding and a commitment to empowerment falls short when it comes to implementation in this part of the country.

**Emerging priorities and suggestions for a vibrant Panchayati Raj System:**

If the institutions through which women are being given a space for political participation are not being given the mandated powers and functions for effective participation, it would be wrong to expect much from them. Moreover in this era of information technology, with talks about e-governance and good governance, there has to be substantial capacity-building measures. With their present level of education and skills women will it extremely difficult to cope efficiently with the amount of work that has been mandated to them. There has to be net-working of women groups, to share experiences and collectively arrive at solutions to their problems. The key areas of concern for meaningful participation of the women members in the Panchayati Raj institutions can be divided into the following.

**Panchayat Structures and Powers:**

There is still a lot of confusion and lack of clarity about the powers and financial resources of the Gaon Panchayat. This is however not confined to the women representatives alone. Some elected members found themselves to be powerless because of the lack of political and financial powers of the Gaon Panchayats. Not enough devolution of powers and areas of functioning had taken place. This has hampered the fulfillment of promises made to the village people.

There is the need to strengthen the Gaon Sabha In every Gaon Sabha meeting receipts and expenditure of the current year, works taken up, the vouchers
of all the purchases, acquitances, salary paid to the panchayat staff, measurement book, list of beneficiaries, etc should be placed for public scrutiny. Mahila Sabhas should be held before the Gaon Sabha meetings so that the agenda of the women can be put forth in the Gaon Sabha meetings.

There has to be the strengthening of co-ordination and co-operation between the government officials and the elected representatives of the Panchayats and the need to do away with parallel bodies or amalgamate them with the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The development officials who work in the panchayat bodies do not come under the purview of local bodies. The District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) operates a large number of rural development activities and resources under the control of the Deputy Commissioner of the district and is not under the purview of Panchayat bodies.

Very limited powers are given to Panchayats to mobilize resources on their own. This makes them merely implementing agencies, of the schemes and programmes of the union and state governments.

**Support services for women:**

In order to ensure effective participation of women in panchayats the necessary support services should be provided to the women members as most of them are first time entrants to public offices. Though women have not mentioned the need of domestic assistance by way of childcare, support facilities in this sphere will go a long way to help them to discharge their duties more sincerely. When attending meetings or training camps at a distance they should be called in groups or the persons accompanying them should also be given travel allowance as this will help to overcome their security problem. Residential accommodation should be provided at the Blocks so that women members from far flung villages do not feel problems of shelter when they have to attend panchayat meetings. Women members need to be paid honorarium and there should be some support
in the terms of travel allowance and dearness allowance when they go out on official work.

Capacity Building and training:

In order to help the panchayat members to function more effectively, training is of critical importance. More so, because many of them do not have any prior experience in dealing with public affairs. Training is regarded as a process of developing skills, habits, knowledge, and aptitudes for the purpose of increasing the effectiveness of persons in their present positions as well as preparing them for future positions. Training imparts professional knowledge, correct patterns of behavior, habits and aptitudes and broader vision. It helps an entrant to acquire skills and knowledge which contribute towards the furtherance of the department's goal. There are constant changes in goals and techniques. Training adjusts a person to the new environment and makes up the deficiency in the recruits. Training should be continuous in response to the community's felt needs. Most importantly training has to aim at changing the mindset of the bureaucrats, as well as the women members, so that they can assist the empowerment of women. Comprehensive and meaningful training programmes should be held to change the patriarchal orientation of both men and women.

Training of women should be held close to the villages so as to enable the women to participate without being anxious about children, domestic or occupational chores.

Some of the key resolutions passed at the Seventh Round Table of the Ministers-in-Charge of Panchayati Raj included that training and communication should be viewed as a continuous and ongoing process, leading to enhanced sense of self esteem and confidence; for those members who need it there should be a functional literacy programme; content of training should be relevant to
the ground realities of the elected representatives and should continue to develop and evolve on the basis of feedback and impact assessment and that the overall perspective of training should be to reinforce the issues of social equity, gender sensitivity and justice among the participants in the process of governance including all levels of the bureaucracy.

Visions on 'purna swaraj' through 'gram swaraj', principles of secularism, equality, human rights emanating from the Indian Constitution, gender equity, social justice, poverty alleviation, participatory planning, implementation and monitoring, right to information and transparency, social audit, rules and regulations covering the Panchayati Raj Institutions should form a part of the core curriculum adapted to suit local needs. Trainings should include exposure to best practices through visits to other panchayats.

More than 50 elected representatives from three districts of Assam Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Golaghat gathered for a three-day meeting at Golaghat from 27th May to 31st May 2006 to celebrate their leadership and raise a myriad of issues which have proved to be stumbling blocks in their five-year term as leaders. This has been hailed as the first ever attempt to bring together elected representatives on a common platform. The Sammelan was organized by NEST, a partner organization in Assam in collaboration with the hunger project. To strengthen the Panchayati Raj system of Assam based on the 73rd Amendment to the constitution, The Assam Declarations were presented to the Chief Minister of Assam for his kind consideration after the unanimous approval of 500 elected women representatives of the panchayats who participated in the Convention. These declarations incorporated many provisions like organization of Women Gaon Sabhas prior to the main Gaon Sabhas, devolution of functions and funds to the panchayats on all subjects in the 11th schedule at the earliest, that panchayats be given the power to initiate land reforms and 50% of the revenue received from land reforms be shared with the panchayat, elected women representatives be given honorarium from government funds, DRDA be merged with the panchayats, district planning committees be strengthened and made more efficient,
lock in period of 1-1/2 years before bringing any no-confidence motions against women presidents, re-election ensured within six months of the removal of the gaon panchayat president, among others. To these may be added that the provision for rotation of seats be amended that a seat reserved for women may be extended for two terms. One term is not enough for a newcomer to establish her foothold in the realm of politics and may hamper the sustainability of women.

It is believed that these multi-pronged strategies will go a long way to increase the effectiveness of women representatives and make them a "critical mass". The Act has to be implemented in words as well in spirits. A beginning has been made pregnant with immense possibilities to bring about qualitative changes in the nature of local politics.

**Avenues for further research:**

In course of the study it was perceived that it would be worthwhile to study the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions in those districts of Assam where there have been interventions by governmental and non-governmental institutions to empower women leaders through different capacity building measures.