Chapter IV

Representation of Women in the State Legislative Assembly:
Role of the Regional Political Party

Regionalism is not a new phenomenon in the political system of India. Its existence can be traced back to the days before independence. But certainly the kind and nature of regionalism has changed over the period of time. A country characterized by marked heterogeneity in almost every aspect of social, political and economic sphere of lives, regionalism seems to vary in nature and kind from region to region. And in order to articulate regional sentiments, it is the political parties at the regional level which ‘often’ articulates the need and the desires of the people of a particular region. Holding a similar view, Pradeep Kumar goes on to say that any regional sentiments needs to be organized, channelized in state politics which otherwise loses its meaning and the responsibility of it lies ‘largely’ on the regional political parties.¹ It is largely also because of the fact that even at times the national political parties support and tries to accommodate regional sentiments. But this is much against the dominant idea of regionalism. Nevertheless, it is mostly accepted that regionalism has been a major reason for the rise of regional political parties. The difference in the understanding of regionalism across the country has led to interesting development in the concept and because of this difference different regional political parties have come to be formed in the country over a period of time. Existed even during the pre independence days used by the British imperialist to divide the whole nation and have a strong hold over the country.

Parties operating at the state level have become a reality in the Indian political scene. The importance of the regional parties can be gauged from the fact that any study on the Indian politics would be incomplete without the study of the role played by the regional parties in the national politics. Moreover the importance also lies in its role played in the so called all-India politics and also its relationship with again the so called all India parties.

Tracing the emergence of regional political parties in India, it is important for first to understand why regional political parties emerge. An exhaustive list literature abounds on this. The common understanding of the phenomenon of regional political parties is that there are specific interest, desires, needs and grievances of every ‘region’ or ‘area’. In order to articulate the same, keeping in mind the kind of party system which prevails in the country there is need of regional political parties. According to Sanjib Baruah, the rise of regional parties can be pointed out to the inability of the national parties and ideologies to take into account the concerns of a particular region.

This supposedly has become one of the major reasons for the mushroom growth of regional political parties in the country. The presence of a number of regional parties from 1980’s challenged the monolithic rule of the Congress party. In fact, The Indian political scene was dominated by the feature of a single party system, the Congress which led the freedom struggle and started practicing a hegemonic politics for decades to come in the political scene of the country. And so also was the ideology of ‘centralist’ forces. But it was not that even during this single party dominance there were no regional forces trying to put forward their issues. There were many ‘Lilliputian’

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3 Ibid.
parties which tried to outdo the congress to get ‘under the shadow of the Congress banayan tree.’ In this way regionalism is not a new concept. The forces unleashed by regionalism not only challenged the dominant single party system but altered the nature of national politics. With the coming of regionalism many issues which were ignored as unnecessary for the national politics actually came to light. The regional parties emphasized on many such issues which were merely ignored as ‘peripherial issues’. It is also interesting to know that most of the regional parties formed were based on narrow considerations. Many of them were leader dependent, family controlled undemocratic in nature, which can effectively manipulate the politics and hence can capture power at the state level. There is often lack of any strong basis for the formation of such parties. Some were based on frivolous grounds. The political parties are often criticized of being far away from the basic role of a political party that is combining, articulating and presenting the greater interests of the population with true freedom of the people. The past decade has seen mushroom growth of parties at both the national and regional level. This again does not mean that there is an absence of powerful regional parties which had the capacity to decide the nature of national politics. Mention can be made of AIDMK of Tamil Nadu, Akali Dal of Punjab, and AGP of Assam among the few important. Though some of the regional parties operate in a very limited sphere and have limited objectives yet, these parties played significant role in the national and state politics. It is also seen that those changes have been very crucial for the politics of the country and had long term effects.

A discussion of regionalism in India has seen the best manifestation in the form of regionalism in Assam. And the events that happened in Assam provide the opportunity to understand the phenomenon of regional parties and the allied phenomenon of cultural sub-nationalism.⁹ It is important to mention here that there were quite a few regional political parties in Assam prior to AGP like the People’s Democratic Party and the Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad to name a few. These parties were regionalist in outlook and aimed to address various issues which made the people unrest. But these parties could not play any important role as expected. It was only the AGP which had a tremendous influence in the politics of the state. This was partially because of the background in which it emerged and the enormous support it received from the public. Regionalism as a phenomenon is not new in Assam.¹⁰ Different regional movements organized in the recent past justify it.¹¹ The various movements¹² had high sentiments of the people. They were in every bid to protect and preserve their culture and tradition which they felt was extremely threatened. The articulation of regional sentiments in Assam can be traced to the days after independence. The fact that regional sentiments grow mostly due to the dissatisfying attitude of the central forces seems debatable. There are two views on this. Sometimes the central party does take into account the problems faced by a particular region and attempts to solve it from ‘their’ perspective. While on the other hand, they totally ignore it as ‘non-national’ issue hence leading to the formation of the regional parties. The phenomenon of regionalism in Assam falls under the second category. The centralist forces which had engulfed the ‘smaller issues’ of the regions remained consistent for a long period. The major premise of any regional party was the undeniable fact that firstly, there are

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⁹ Sanjib, op. cit., p. 282.
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² A number of movements took place from time to time which could be called as popular movements creating almost a hysteria supporting the cause of the movement.
specific problems of the region and secondly, the usual ‘central’ perspective was not sufficient to deal with the issues confronting the region. And such an idea legitimized the growth as well as the strength of the regional parties. It will be no exaggeration if regionalism could be equated with Asom Gana Parishad. Politics of Assam and issues of the state assumed centre stage in the ‘national politics’ primarily because of the party. The emergence of the party was in itself a phenomenon.\footnote{For a discussion on the on the emergence of the party, see “Emergence of Asom Gana Parishad” in Girin Phukon, \textit{Politics of Regionalism in North East India}, New Delhi: Spectrum, 1996, pp.44-60.}

In the context of Assam, the formation of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the most important regional political party in Assam, can surely be said to be the result of such regionalistic fervor. The situation which led to the formation of the party was grave and serious. The period form 1977-85 was marked by extreme form of regionalism. As said above that the movement which started off as the movement for the ‘neglected people’ had to its credit being the movement which stirred not only the entire state but also the nation compelling the latter to correct its attitude towards the region. What will be emphasized here is not a detail discussion of how and why the AGP emerged but rather on the following the movement for regionalism, the Assam Movement which led to the emergence of AGP. There is enough proof of the fact that the Assam movement had the massive support of women than any other section of the society. ‘The pictorial’\footnote{Dilip Mahanta, \textit{The Best of Assam Movement: A Pictorial}, Guwahati: Secondary Board of Publication,1987.} gives a vivid and sensitive picture of the nature and the extent women participated in the movement. Such a fact is substantiated strongly by the experience of the few women leaders\footnote{Two women leaders of the present day AGP were interviewed were in the forefront of the movement and later joined the party as members.} of the party who were then active in the movement. Women engaged themselves in various protests, arranged meetings and forum to mobilize the women
Some women joined the movement spontaneously while some were to be organized to carry on the objectives of the Assam movement. They were even seen staging dharnas, picketing, blocking roads and reacting extremely when the situation demanded. The regional and the local newspapers had pictures in their front pages showing women, the various ways in which they took active part in the movement. It was largely felt by the women that along with the menfolk it was highly necessary that they too should shoulder the responsibility of protecting and preserving the culture and tradition of the ‘Asomiyas’. The movement was strongly supported by the women whether through the active role of the various mahila samities which were spread all over the state and had an important role to play in the society and even by the Lekhika Samraooh’s for example, the Asom Lekhikha Santha gave an ‘open letter’ to the then Governor of Assam, appealing on deploying police force for extradition of illegal migrants in the state, reconsideration of the citizenship act and strengthening of border areas and security etc. many such organizations incorporated such issues during that phase. It needs to be mentioned here that the various organizations operating in the state was increasingly realizing the ‘specific’ problems the state and the region experience. This was actually the primary motive drawn by the movement which further facilitated the support of all sections of people in the state. The above mentioned associations became active and took serious measures so far the goal of the movement was concerned. The time when the movement was gaining strong ground, women pledged to extend active and continuous support to the movement and even appealed to the womenfolk of the state to walk on democratic lines and to curb anything which is

17 The Assam Tribune, 7 December 1979.
18 The Assam Tribune, 16 December, 1979.
unlawful and harassing.\textsuperscript{19} Most important fact which deserves attention is the way that the various women organizations took into its fold the goal of the movement. They rendered full support and kept their goals at stake for the larger benefit of the society. It was seen that they were not satisfied with just petty words of support to the movement, rather was in full action. They expressed their ‘non-fearing’ attitude during the movement.

The growth of the movement from its nascent stage had women as ardent supporters and the most resilient to all atrocities inflicted by the government. In a proper analysis of the participation of women, in the movement there are a number of aspects to be ascertained. When there is a question of women participation in the movement, it has to be remembered that it has to be understood that this participation was both ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’. Direct would mean the direct and active participation of women in the movement while there were women who instead chose to remain in the ‘household’ and extend support to their male kith and kin. This is important in the backdrop of the kind of societal set up women in Assam have been till date. Women in Assam have been comparatively with the rest of the country been much more involved in ‘public’ activities. So in some way or the other confinement was not prevalent in a harder way. There was greater degree of mobility at different stages of social, economic and political milieu of the state. This might be due to the absence of purdah, rigid caste system and also the tribal work pattern.\textsuperscript{20} But this mobility has been more expressive in case of cultural and economic affairs and not in the political sphere. In social life of the communities of the North East women have an honoured and a visible role to

\textsuperscript{19} The Assam Tribune, 27, December, 1979.
Women in Assam seem to have proven to this fact. In fact it is argued that traditional culture and social structure might explain complete exclusion from politics and affect women’s decision to run for office, but in case of Assam seemed to have been incorrect. Rather women’s role in the cultural activities seemed to have facilitated their public activities. Existence of various women organizations which had as its goal on changing the social, economic and cultural aspects of the society were undoubtedly a medium of change and most importantly the role it played during the movement days. But with a history of women’s active participation in the political scene of the scene there has been almost no evidence of any organization which emphasized on the ‘political’ rights and responsibilities women have. This absence probably had affected even later, in the ‘expected’ role a woman could play in politics. The emphasis was seen to be on the social and economic aspects, This has come to be seen in case of women in Assam.

There seemed to have a general feeling of dissatisfaction in the entire North-Eastern region including Assam because of the failure of the state to integrate with the national mainstream, economically or otherwise which have eventually led to the origin as well as proliferation of a large number of insurgent groups, autonomous movements which represented the cause of the regional and tribal groups on ethnic lines. And the Assam movement can be said to be one such movement of ‘dissatisfaction’ with the national mainstream. Women extended their popular support apparently because of they could see that the electoral system had failed to include them and ‘their issues’, the

23 Aparna Mahanta, op. cit.,p.177.
support for such movement was obvious. The electoral system which is the apex of any democratic polity ensures representative participation of all citizens in the highest policy making and executive functions of the state. But women and other weaker sections of the party could not get fully integrated into the state processes which are seen in the poor performance of their election to the representative bodies. A gain it has to be remembered that the ‘kind’ of support shown to the movement was extraordinary. Though many a times it has been argued that it is more because of the motherly concern, ‘filial sentiments’ yet women went to extreme measures of laying down their loves for their state which they refer to as ‘ai asom’. There were a number of women who suffered torture and faced atrocities and even lost their lives to the repressive measures of the government. So this question dwells importance on the understanding of women about the movement as there was an unexplainable participation of women. To add to the existing understanding of the role of women in the movement, the narration by the now women leaders of the party seems to differ from the dominant view.

When questioned on their understanding of the role of women in the movement which eventually decided the course of events in the arena of politics, they viewed a couple of observations. Firstly, the ‘wave’ engulfed women more than the male. Secondly, the role of women as leaders was not recognized though leadership was in the hands of women in smaller groups all over the state. Thirdly, the non homogeneous nature of women participating in the movement was a characteristic feature of the movement.

24 Ibid.
25 Aparna op. cit., p.171.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 The Assam Tribune, 6 February 1980.
29 There were only a very few women who led the movement then and a minuscule of them could get into the party as leaders but they forgetting the past as to what the party had done the women leaders are still continuing with their goal in the party.
30 Two women leaders of the AGP party had been interviewed, who were a part of the movement. The interviews were conducted on 11.02.2012 and 27.12.2012.
Women differed not only from the perspective of class but even in terms of economic, religion, caste, creed and language. This difference was not emphasized. They came together forming a category, as women. But it cannot also be denied that women during the initial phase of the movement joined because of the euphoria the movement was creating and also because of the kind of leadership, which completely a male, been provided. The women leaders opined that there was a lack of initial understanding of the motto of the movement because there were women who were not educated. A simple understanding that it had to do something good for the ‘Assamese community’ and ‘Assam’ pushed them to become even the vanguard of the movement. With the growth of the movement and clarity in the understanding of the concept of ‘regionalism’ which was show cased by the movement seems to be difficult for women to comprehend. But this did not deter them to slow down their action. A parallel women’s movement too was gaining ground unaware. Whether there was an independent aim or objective of that movement seems questionable. But its presence could not be denied. What needs to be emphasized here is the ‘ability’ to be such a dependable force for any massive movement like that of the Assam movement. If this ability has been accepted in the form of the acceptance of the support extended by women in the movement, there lies no justification on the ‘inability’ of women to take decisions or for that matter even representation. But this argument did not turn true in case of women in Assam despite having both a movement to refer so far as activism in public activities is concerned. There are of course more than evident reasons for the same. But above all the factors, the fact that women could not fight the patriarchal elements working even the movement seems true. If the pictures depicting the movement and the reports of the newspapers on the movement were to be properly

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31 This aspect has been also accepted by the two women leaders interviewed of the party who actively participated in the movement.
analyzed there has been very less women leaders who could actually come up to the ‘patriarch’ rule of few male leaders of the movement. Whether this condition of lack of leadership is due to ‘lack in the opportunity’ for women or ‘inability’ to lead people can be another dimension to understand the gender dimension of the movement or the non recognition of the efforts of women leaders in the movement remains a big question.

The situation following the movement which saw the signing of the accord and coming of the first regional political party of the state had many expectations to fulfill. The sense of success of the movement and for the people overshadowed the failure of the so called party leaders to even recognize and realize that they ignored the due to be paid back to the women of the state by inclusion of women in the different phases of talks leading up to signing of the accord and even in the inclusion of women members in the government formed after the 1983 elections. Adding to this already known fact it was opined by the senior women leaders of the party that there is complete truth of the fact that women were ‘used’ with no benefits to reap. According to Sheila Borthakur and Sabita Goswami, who made a study on the role of women in the movement opined that women were only workers, played a subsidiary role and a non-political role, carrying out the dictates of the political organizations spearheading the movement.32

The party leaders lacked faith in the capacity of women calibre to run a government. The feminists were highly disillusioned with the party and the leaders who failed to recognize the efforts. Though a ‘lip service’ was paid to their dedication yet this recognition was not realized in action. The government formed on 14th October 1985 had a ‘minuscule’ number of women. This came as a shock to the women of the state and the ones who were actively involved in the movement waiting for what they genuinely deserved. This sense of disappointment surfaced slowly after the formation of

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32 Aparna, op. cit.p.178.
the government with little or no effect. The 'strategic' exclusion of women from the government excluded their perspectives too. A similar idea has been put forward by the feminists who claim that having more women in the legislature would ensure women legislators taking note of the policies that address gender inequality and frame policies explicitly for women. But there is also the other side of this idea that no matter how many get into the seat of legislation there is no corresponding increase in policies addressing gender inequality or women in particular. And it is to be noted that women's inclusion in the movement seemed to include their perspectives too.

In the process running up to the formation of the government, when there were rounds of talks and meetings going on, very few women were presented in these talks and many times they were not even informed of the crucial meetings held. This is a deviation from the constitution, where it has been clearly mentioned that for every special meeting, yearly general meeting and general convention there should be a notice before seven, ten and fifteen days consecutively. This is often the case which leads the women members in the party organization to think negative of the intention of the male party leaders. This under representation of women at the point of final decision can and does have serious consequences. This exclusion could have been justified without the contribution of this large section of population, but not when their contribution has adorned many pages of history. The role which women had at best played till date in the region was that of a peace maker and patriarchy seemed to restrict the women to that role than show up with the desire to share power. This is an important observation so far the role of women is concerned. The role of women in peace keeping has been very

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33 This view is expressed by a senior women leader of the party. Interviewed on 27.12.2012.
35 Constitution of AGP, p.5.
important through various initiatives taken up by various organisations\textsuperscript{37} and studies conducted has helped to understand the need as well the possible effects of including women in peace process. Though this has come to be important in the recent past, yet there is still much to do so far inclusion of women’s group from Assam and North East in setting up agenda for such process is concerned. And this circumscribing of the role of women cannot be justified on any grounds, whether inability or inexperience’s. In case of North East and Assam in particular, women have had far more experiences probably than any other state of the country. It cannot be exactly identified what all is required for women to get into power, but certainly, restrictions on frivolous grounds cannot be surely entertained.

Though the study here do not emphasize the act of ‘representation’ within the party so far as women is concerned, yet it is important to understand what actually goes on which later might decide subsequent major factors as representation in the legislature. According to Wendy Stokes, political parties are like organizations where there are different jobs, hierarchies etc. and internal party takes different forms, thus meaning that it is important to take note of who holds those posts. And these post holders within a party further influence and even shape the ethos of a party.\textsuperscript{38} The role of the party as a gatekeeper is crucial to understand. The most accepted reason for any political party to ‘field’ a small number of women for elections, is argued by the feminists as because of the rigid ‘gate keeping’ function of the political parties.\textsuperscript{39} This gate keeping function seems to be one of the major obstacles in the political recruitment system\textsuperscript{40} for any women to win elections, besides other factors. This is said to be one of

\textsuperscript{37} Organizations like North East Women Initiative for Peace formed in 2009 and North East Network are some of the major organizations working at different levels for peace in the region.


\textsuperscript{39} Pamela Paxton, \textit{op. cit.}, p.102.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}
the initial hurdles faced by a woman ‘candidate to fight elections. When questioned on this aspect of gate keeping of the AGP party, the women leaders of the party, the senior who were members of the legislature opined that there is no denial of the fact that the road from the days of movement to the space of decision making, the state legislature was struggle some. In a very vital revelation by the women leaders of the party, they expressed their dejection on the failure of any women member becoming the president of the party since its inception till date. The party leadership has been held all these years by the male leaders, who is selected/ elected by the members themselves.

Whatever be the basis of selection, a woman member will never be ‘allowed’ to assume the position. This is said to be related again with the ‘non ability’ of the women members to deal with greater issues happening in the state. Because of the ‘fewer’ number of women in the party compared to any other party existing in the state, it seems that the women leaders or otherwise women in the party committees find it extremely difficult to get their work done. Even after decades of their existence and with the growing importance of the ‘need’ of including more and more women in the legislature, the party still seems lethargic in their attitude towards this issue. Though the party has been in power twice, in both the terms there has not been any rise in the number of women representatives. Out of four women interviewed, 41 each of them, on whether AGP acted and whether it continues to act as a rigid gate keeper, opined that its rigidity still continues, because of which the party’s support from women remains and in fact is increasing but this does not translate into the various stages leading to representation. The second stage which follows from the gate keeping stage is that of ‘consideration’ of women as nominee from the party to fight elections. This ‘consideration’ is based on a number of factors. One of all is being ‘powerful’ in the party. This means that a woman

41 Four women leaders who were representatives in the state legislature during the AGP regime were interviewed on 11.02.2012, 15.02.2012, 27.03.2012, 27.03.2012.
who would be a nominee of the party is already assumed to have a hold in the party. The interviewees of the party found the term ‘powerful’ inappropriate and rather emphasized on the ‘capacity’ of the women representative to work for the ‘people’. But they also accept the fact that this process of selection, nomination and winning is much more a complex process than it seems. It is pertinent to mention here that this process of selection, nomination and winning depends to a great extent on the male leaders of the party. Even when women want to run for office, the role of the male political gatekeepers who decides the candidate list, ordering of the candidates will eventually decide who will go to the parliament. This indicates a kind of a ‘control system’ over female candidacy for any position in the party and even to the aspect of representation. This has been a common scenario in Indian electoral system, where in a majority of cases women do not have a say in the selection of candidates and their names are decided by the party leaders only. And these party leaders are usually males. AGP continued to play the similar role played by any political party of the country.

The Asom Gana Parishad came into existence on 14th October 1985 and got into the seats of power again in 1996. The new regional political party took in its fold the other regional parties and organizations which were a part of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AASGSP) and All Assam Students Union (ASSU) which were responsible for spear heading the movement. On a detail analysis of the role of the party on the women issues, there has been little or no difference. This should be first

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42 The women members of the party interviewed opined that though the sphere of politics is challenging yet there is no ‘personal ambition’ or urge for power, and intends to only serve the people by also doing a social service and experiencing a great amount of satisfaction. They also opined that this is the major criteria which differentiate them from their male counterparts.


looked at from the ‘number’ factor. The first term of the AGP saw only one woman from the party and the second term saw only two. This number speaks volume. The change in the stance of the party towards women representation seemed ‘rigid’. The rise of the number of the women leaders could not rise above two which in comparison to the 126 constituency seats is utterly less. As mentioned above these women who crossed the arduous stages of representation seems to have much more difficult tasks ahead when placed in the legislature to legislate.

In both the terms of the government, AGP as being the single most powerful regional party in the state fielded only two women candidate in its two year term. This is abysmally low in number in the 126 seat legislature. This number has serious implication to convey. There is a great deal of debate on the factor of number so far as implication of representation in case of women is concerned. The other group who advocates the theory that it’s not in numbers that the significance of lies but on the ‘outcome’ or what legislation has been carried out by these women representatives. Even if we assume that the legislature is a space of serious discussion and deliberation, there is a minimal chance on the part of women representatives to ‘actually legislate’. The male leaders seems to hold the strong ‘implicit’ notion that it is they who are better in the act of legislating matters and by thinking so they are often seen to belittle matters concerning women. This seems to be one of the major obstacles in taking up matters concerning women in the space like the State Assembly. On a careful consideration of the fact we can see that the former legislator had allegations when denied the ticket

46 The advocate of this ‘number’ theory supports the fact that there should be a ‘quantity’ to make a start for a new process and the size of the ‘minority’ in politics is important for the possibility of change. On this see, Inger Skjelshack and Dan Smith,(eds.) Gender Peace and Conflict, London: Sage Publications, 2001.
47 The ‘outcome factor’ implies that number is not a judging factor, rather policy outcomes are. Intended to make a change a small number too can make a difference. On this see, Anne Phillips, Politics of Presence, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.
48 Excerpt from the interview with an AGP women leader interviewed on 15.02.2012.
even when she had been in the movement and had complete ‘belief’ in her ability to work for people, carrying out the ideology of the party and even win the seat of the constituency she wanted to contest from.

The political parties make decisions which candidates to field and how much support to give them through, like placements on party lists etc.⁴⁹ The party recognized one of its member’s successes of winning the seat for the party by allocating the portfolio of social welfare, sericulture, weaving, and handloom and of women and child welfare department, besides being the minister of state. On being questioned whether the party had supported the minister so far as winning the seat and in the entire process of representation, the representatives unanimously expressed a sense of recognition to importance of party ideas above an individual, though at the same time pointed out the struggle both within the party as well as in the legislature after winning the seat, to convince of the ability to carry out the difficult act of representation in their own terms. One of the interviewee empathetically opined on the dominant nature of the male leaders of the party and the fact that even though women members work hard for the party, yet they have to play the second fiddle and most of the time underplay the capacity of the women members, even after they have proved that they have won elections.⁵⁰ This itself shows how potent is the role of the political parties in the context of representation of women. The modalities to be worked out are absolutely at the discretion of the political parties. The greater question is whether the party regards women as a viable ‘category’ which has a high degree of winnability. It is important to underline that winnability amongst women is a crucial point because when the system is all about winning and capturing power, no party is eager to compromise on this crucial feature. The pertinent question is whether the party thinks women incapable of making a

⁵⁰ Excerpt from the interview with an AGP women leader interviewed on 15.02.2012.
decisive judgment on important issues which a male can? The two AGP women who were former representatives, agreed on the fact that it is always the ‘party head’ which decides on who should hold the portfolio of any department and whether any of the winning candidate should be given at all even. This aspect becomes much tougher when it comes to women because there is always a ‘doubt’ which surrounds a woman representative. And this ‘doubt’ continues to extend even to the ability of taking a decision. There seems to be an agreement between the former AGP women leaders that politics still being a ‘man’s world’ even after being constitutionally guaranteed of equality on political grounds, the political parties do make affairs difficult for women.

Agreeing on the importance of the legislature as the most important space for substantial work to carry out for women in particular but with tiny amount of women, from a party makes legislation extremely difficult. Though there is a ‘moral responsibility’ of almost every women representative to work for women, which even the other women representatives beyond parties agreed, yet there are ‘other issues’ which they need to deal too. The representatives of the AGP did consider the fact that as Assam is diversified in many aspects and these differences needs to be taken up and worked upon which the party intended to carry out in its two year term. But this seems to be possible only when the party is in power and there can be a ‘selection’ of questions to be discussed. But when it comes to women’s issues, which is rarity, there seemed to be a positive atmosphere where in women representatives irrespective of party comes together to lend their support. The two interviewees stated that the reason why the number of issues has been so less is also because of the lack of initiative on the part of both the male and female representatives to ‘ignore’ the women issue, which in

51 The doubt factor is opined by the women leaders of the party to be intricately related with the ability of making decisions ‘rationally’. The reason of the few women presence in the party is ascribed to the ‘history’ of the party’s ‘insensitive’ attitude towards women and the implicit undermining of their ability.
52 Two women representatives interviewed on 15.02.2012 and 27.03.2012 opined this similar view.
case of former is much more. There is also an aspect of the ‘method’ of selecting questions for discussion and the procedure to be followed for the same that at times pose as a hurdle eventually putting this issue at a back foot. Therefore the idea in totality is that the ‘act of representativeness’ ‘for women’ is a challenging task. According to the performance of the AGP this becomes difficult to conclude that the party has come up to its promise of ‘changing’ the face of the state with its ideology of ideology.

The party’s response to the question of women can also be evaluated from the nature of work of the women’s wing of the party, the Asom Mahila Parishad. The constitution of the party states that in order to popularize the party organization there are sister organizations to work for the people of the state. There are four sister organizations, each one for women, farmers, trade union and the organization for the youth and students. The women’s wing is supposed to be one of the strongest among all the wings of the party. The women’s wing has a constitution of its own, with its own flag. The present constitution of the Assam Mahila Parishad was adopted on 27.04.1992 at Sibsagar where the party was having its general meeting. A 14 point aims and objectives have been worked upon by the Parishad. The organizational structure is such that there are women wings at each level of the state, the Zilla, Anchalik and Goan level. At the central level, the office of which is in Guwahati heads the Parishad at each level. There is a central committee of the central body of the Parishad with fifty five members. A similar structure follows at each level of the state. The decentralizing of power to the different levels in the state makes the wing prepared to deal with various problems confronting women in different parts of the state. This also enables the women members of the Parishad informed of the problems specific to a particular area

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53 Constitution of AGP, p.27.
54 It is only in 2013 that the old constitution has been amended to get merged with the main constitution.
or community. This needs to be mentioned here that AGP as a regional party claims to include in its fold people belonging to every section. Heterogeneity being one of the main characteristics of Assam so far as social, cultural, linguistic, religious etc affinities is concerned, the party cannot but keep this aspect in mind when working for the various section of the society.

In order to have a proper understanding of the party’s stance on the women issue, it becomes indispensable to discuss the various objectives uphold by the party. It is to be pointed out that the party though came to power in 1985; the Constitution for the Mahila Parishad came years later. It was in one of the convention of the party in Sibsagar that the party adopted the constitution of the Mahila Parishad. In fact, the years of movement coincided with the women’s decade, where every nation’s political parties, government and non government organization etc. was gearing up to include and prioritize women’s issues in their agenda. But the party started including the women’s issues much later after the formation of the party. Nevertheless, the wing came to be formed and attempt was made to mobilize women on the political basis and also work for the all round development of women, with special emphasis on the political education. The Parishad has a fourteen point goal and objectives. The Parishad aims at securing social, political, economic development of women along with opening up for opportunities in each of these spheres for an egalitarian society free of domination and discrimination. It calls for a united effort by every woman for national unity and integrity and work for the all round development of the state. The Parishad also aims for adopting special measures for women belonging to backward classes, schedule caste and tribes. This in a way indicates at an all comprehensive plan for women from diversity in respect to caste, creed and religion etc. as the constitution reads there will be a central body of the Parishad which in turn will form the central committee which is
the working committee and responsible for major tasks. The committee will be headed by a chairperson (sabhanetri) and there will be a chairperson at each level of functioning. The quorum for a general meeting is one third of the total membership of the Parishad. The Parishad can convene special meetings in addition to the general meetings once every three months, and at each level general convention will be held after every three years. Within the Parishad at each level varied number of issues concerning women in the state is taken up for discussion and steps are accordingly taken with due consultation. It is the chairperson with the general secretary that discusses and informs the parent body of its decisions. It is the requirement of the Parishad to inform the parent body of any major decision taken by the Parishad. This indicates the ‘control’ of the parent body largely composed of male members over the women’s wing. There is hardly any scope for autonomous decisions to be taken by the wing. The women leaders interviewed, who were also the members of the Parishad opined that this in many ways curtails the wing’s capacity to deal issues independently eventually landing up at toeing the lines of the party, rather ‘party leaders’.

A strong women’s wing of any political party can be indicative of the responsibility of the party towards gender issue and the concerns. On being questioned, the former women representatives who also were members of the Mahila Parishad opined that the wing usually takes up those issues which come up from time to time. The women’s wing from time to time has been staging demonstrations; protests etc on various issues concerning women. The wing has the freedom to carry out such public activities as thought to be required by the wing. The fact that there is ‘type’ of issues which the wing can handle on its own or otherwise when there is a question of the party’s image, the matter is well attended by the parent body. The issues raised,

55 The four women respondents were also members of the women’s wings at different points of time.
56 As opined by two women representatives interviewed on 27.03.2012 and 15.02.2013
discussed and supported by the wing are primarily the issues which are ‘of women’ but yet they also seem to raise voices against issues which the parent body supports. It is highly demanded that the wing should by no means protest against those issues which the parent body does not sanction. The women members of the wing, ensures that the parent body supports their decisions on almost all issues which seldom happens. This brings in the question of dissent between the parent body and the women’s wing. Most often it seems that the party does not approve of the way a certain issue is handled by the latter and which the wing thinks it to be the most appropriate way of doing it. Under such circumstances the rift which seems clear but only to close down to the ‘dictates’ of the parent body. Therefore, the issues which the women’s wing raises are also restricted. This practice of accepting ‘orders’ gets into the mode of working of the women members of the party and which even slips into the ‘style of working’ of the women representatives. After all in the legislature too, a woman representative is rarely seen disagreeing to the party’s point of view. The women’s wing also strictly follows the aims and objectives of their constitution which is different from that of the party’s main constitution.

The activities undertaken by the women’s wing not only keeps the women in the party abreast the rest of the party members of the happenings about women, but also make the party leaders sensitive and responsive towards taking effective steps for women, which otherwise is difficult to bring forth. Therefore effective working of the wing is dependent on a number of issues, primarily the support of the parent body which is again highly questionable. Though in the internal functioning of the wing, they need not consult the parent body, but it is ultimately the main body that has to approve the final decision. This signals the rigidity of the party structure, the reins of which has

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57 Constitution of the Mahila Parishad of the AGP.
58 As said by the women leaders interviewed of the party.
been in the hands of male members of the party. It was opined the women members of the party that this rigidity can send a wrong signal to other women who have been working for the party for a long time and aspires to be in power with ample support of the party. Over the years, the overall situation of the party too seems to decline in a massive manner which also has put into backseat the women question. It is to be borne in mind that the problems confronted by the women in North East India and Assam in particular are specific to the region and that an all comprehensive look is not sufficient to understand the intricacies of the problem. Besides, the women of the region are not one homogeneous group as there are diverse in so far as ethnic, tribal and non tribal identity goes. Assam is also the homeland of a number of indigenous tribes and communities, who have a distinct identity of theirs and which the party states that it is proud protector of the same. But the party’s stand on so far as protecting promoting the interest of the various ethnic communities has remained ambiguous. Women are not just women; they are of particular race, ethnicity, religion, class or sexual orientation. If the male members of any indigenous groups are present to articulate the group’s interests, women’s interests are likely to be pushed aside. This implies that even within a tribe or ethnic community women face specific problems which have to be dealt accordingly. It is to be noted here that the anti foreigner movement which rocked Assam between 1979 and 1985 led to a large scale ‘free for all’ types of ethnic riots. Though the party claims to include all these diverse section of population yet, the women problem seems to be down the list of priority for the party. AGP claims to work for the diversity which exist and for the backward classes, much rising the question of


attending the problem. The lip service paid to women and their issues by other parties seems to be true in case of AGP over the years.

Another often unattended area which needs to be looked carefully yet ignored is the role of the independent candidates in an electoral system. The role played by these candidates though have been very minimal because there have been very less independent candidates who have actually got into the seats of power. A detail analyses seems inevitable because of the fact that they have chosen not to be a part of any political party. And this is certainly a difficult decision on the part of any candidate contesting election in a strong party based political system. And in an electoral competition where the battle is far fiercer for a woman candidate than for male candidate, the legitimacy of the ‘representative capacity’ is highly questioned. It is often seen that women usually shows allegiance towards the stronger parties. But with the onset of multiparty system, regional political parties playing an important role in national politics, coalition government etc. there seems to be a rise in the independent candidates. As in case of Assam, the number of independent women candidates contesting elections was seen in an upward graph from 1978. But what is interesting is to look into is that the number of ‘contesting’ women candidates was growing without much success in their winning. From the year 1978 till 2006 there have were 18 of independent women candidates contesting elections, out of which only 3 had won. This statistical fact has significant implications so far as women candidates attitude towards political parties are concerned. Besides other factors, the mode of working of the political parties and it’s role so far as women is concerned seems the most important factor for women candidate deciding to fight elections as independents. This can be assumed to be related with the collapse of a single party system.
Role of Independent Women Representatives: A couple of factors can be identified for women candidates to fight elections on an independent basis. There has been no work carried out on the role of independent candidates in Assam electoral system. Because of which the study has to rely on the data collected through interview schedule and questionnaire response given by the few independent candidates who won elections at different point of time under the period of study. As such there were a couple of independent candidates who were available for the purpose of study. The experience of the interviewed independent candidate can be used to understand the scenario of an electoral politics where there might be an independent view or vision of a certain section of people different from that of the political party. The three independent candidate interviewed reveals very interesting facts on the status of the independent candidates. As opined by both of them, the first and important reason for them deciding to fight out elections in a strong party based system is the loss of faith in the fact that the existing political parties have failed to deliver what they should. Secondly, they seem to support a more welfare based politics than being power hungry or claiming for power. They also, viewed that the community based wisdom, their idea of doing social and contributing more in decisions on health education, domestic policy etc. can help the world much more than conflict and then on resolution. Lastly, there have been many independents and two amongst them was let down by a party when they raised the issue of having a ticket to fight elections. They interviewees agreed that there is no doubt on the importance of the legislature as the space for discussing such

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61 Three former independent women representatives were interviewed on 25.03.2012, 10.04.2012, and 22.04.2012.
62 Excerpt from the interview conducted with the independent women representatives.
63 The independent candidates interviewed were of the view that a greater sense of disappointment prevails among the voters in the state though in a latent manner so far as the role of the political parties are concerned. The independent candidates provide an alternative choice to the voters.
64 Swanee Hunt, op.cit, p.119.
65 The two independent candidates fought their maiden election and even won it as independents. One between the two got elected from AGP in her second term.
issues by the representatives which are grievances of the people. These grievances are the reflection of the reality, the consequences of the failure of the political parties and the political system. But by winning elections they seem to realize that there is no need to be a ‘party member’ when it comes to delivering of services to the people is concerned. One of the independent candidate who has been winning seats thrice from 1991 to till 2011 has been mostly argumentative of the role of the political parties so far as women is concerned. The representative being elected thrice seemed extremely important to be able to fight elections ‘on one’s own terms’ without being dictated by the political party consisting of males dominantly. Lamenting on the ‘male dominated’ politics, the road for independent candidates to success doubles up when there comes in to prioritize women’s issues.

**Socio-Economic Status of the Women Representatives:** As discussed in the previous chapter the importance of analyzing the socio economic status of the women representatives for a thorough understanding of the act of representation, the same is intended in the following so far as women representatives who were elected as independent and from AGP party is concerned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Educational Status</th>
<th>Prior Occupation</th>
<th>Caste Linkage</th>
<th>Family Linkage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent No.1</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>Social Service</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent No.2</td>
<td>Matriculation</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent No.3</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Social service</td>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Field work)

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66 This view was expressed by a woman representative who won elections twice as an independent.
The table clearly indicates to some major aspects common to the three women representatives who have been elected to the Assembly under the period of study. Firstly, is the common factor of them being associated actively in social service which helped them to understand the problems of the people. Secondly, the aspect of being educated has been common and thirdly, none of them belonged to the general caste but rather came from the reserved category. Except one respondent, one the other two did not have any family linkage to politics. This is said to be by one of the respondent to be one of the most difficult tasks for any candidate and more so for being a woman the goal becomes tougher to achieve. This complicated situation gets more complex for the ones who does not have a background and new to the field and is left to learn everything on their own and prove their caliber for the purpose. This is said to be a ‘positive’ factor with the political parties giving lip service to the aspect of women’s political representation.

The most important aspect of being in the seat of representation is the ability to place matters of people in the floor of the house for discussion. This seems to be one of the most important tasks of a representative which if efficiently done can yield satisfaction. But statistics shows a different picture altogether. With the number of independent candidates failing to get into the seats of power in the state legislature, there is a probable absence of a perspective which otherwise would have been possible. When questioned on the reasons why quite a considerable number of women not only fail but forfeit their deposit, the reasons though many are fundamentally one. The factor is the failure of ‘convincing’ the electorates without the party support. There has been substantial literature showing that there is a difference in voter’s view point so far as male and female candidates are concerned and such stereotyping of preferences and
gender bias works at the disadvantage of female candidate most of the time.\textsuperscript{67} This is also linked with the role of the political parties. According to Duverger, political parties hesitate to field women because they fear that the voters will not support them.\textsuperscript{68} If the political parties have a history of being supportive of women’s issues, the chances of voter’s inclination towards selecting women representation might be positive. And once a political party endorses a woman candidate it is assumed that the woman candidate has credentials better than a male candidate and she is going to be successful in the job firstly and secondly, the fact that the political parties want to save them from any criticism that they did not field any women and if in case there is a failure by the candidate, the party will not be responsible for endorsing them rather it would be fault of the candidate itself.\textsuperscript{69} This kind of intention brings up the bigger question of the ‘good’ intention of the political parties in the question of supporting women candidate for elections. In an electoral system, election manifesto is a mirror to reflect a party’s aims and objectives for the next five years. It is a promise done on papers. Therefore the importance of election manifesto is extremely important so far as understanding the goals and objectives of a political party is concerned. It is of knowing a party’s intention towards the development of different sections of society for an electoral period. The first election manifesto of the party came out in 1985. The importance of the election manifesto of the AGP in the year was of great deal compared to any other election manifesto of other parties or even that of the AGP in the subsequent years. This is because of the fact that the party had a historic struggle with an altogether different kind of expectations aroused in the minds of the people of state. The party got into the electoral competition from the year 1985. The opening sentence of the party in its first


\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Ibid.}
election manifesto was that the ‘Asom Gana Parishad’ meant the people of the state and vice versa. Including people across language, caste, religion and creed this new regional political party prepares itself for fulfilling the goals and aspirations of the people who supported the movement throughout. Though impressive might be the beginning, yet the manifesto lacked in mentioning of the contribution of women. Moreover was no mention of any aims or objectives on women’s issues, though it had included almost on every aspect like that what it aimed for the students, farmers, teachers, the backward classes etc. it detailed out on issues like implementing the Assam Accord, public distribution system, health, setting up of a clean and un corrupt administration, proposal for the indigenous people and their crafts etc. And if this is to be taken as yardstick to judge the intentions of a party, it seems justified that the party’s lack of intention on representation of women yielded in no women member to power. This came as an acceptable truth when the party was a product of Assam Movement where the participation of women was magnificent the consequence of such avoidance seemed obvious which came from all quarters, especially from the women members of the party and from the society where they were rooted.

With the ending of President’s rule in the 1991, the party came up with its manifesto for the second time. And it needs to be mentioned here, that the state had undergone a number of changes so far as the social, political and cultural environment was concerned. The year 1991 when the state was ready to go for polls, the party modified its manifesto and revealed its stance on women unlike before and aimed for better prospects for women and other sections of the society. Besides a careful scrutiny of the election manifestos of the party it can be seen that there has been a steady

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71 Ibid.
transition from the arrogant claims to a more moderate tone of the party. This can be seen from the second election manifesto, where the party mentioned of their ‘mistakes’ which they assumed being forgiven by the people of the state which in other ways prepares them for its second term in the seat of power. They promised of doing away with the same with having the faith, trust and confidence of its people intact. The year’s manifesto was of a thirty six point programme. The second election manifesto clearly stated that in clear terms that it still wanted to work for women and their all round development, with emphasis on equal participation of women in all aspects, education and protecting the interest of women in case of employment etc. it also claimed of 33% reservation in the Panchayat and all autonomous bodies. The 1996 election manifesto which had a section on women, wherein the party mentioned of its special plan for the old aged women, women who does not earn, and for the village women to have a livelihood out of the indigenous industry like that of handloom, weaving which would even help them to be economically independent. The party also promised for a society free of crimes against women and children. In its assurance it also talked of providing financial help to the various self help groups and the NGO’s in the state working for women and children. Facing defeat, at the hands of the Congress, the party pulled up all gears to gain back power in the state. The election manifesto read for an all inclusive programme for every section of people of the state except women. The party failed to mention of its strategy for women in the state. There has been a shift from the previous manifestos. It only mentioned of its intention of special schemes for the women weavers. The party talked in the end of its manifesto of bringing about a peaceful, progressive and a unified state against the centralist forces. But there was no mention of women who were the sufferers of the failure of the party to keep up with its

promise, or mention of any plan for mitigating the menace caused by the misdoings of the party when in power.

Assessing the role of AGP in context of women is not an isolated task. AGP continues to be in the limelight till today because of the history it had. The two terms of the regional party was turbulent. This has many reasons to be attributed. The success of the party from the days of the movement to the formation of government twice seemed impressive. But the controversies with the performance of the party since its inception as a ruling party abounds. Though the movement pledged to be non-violent yet spates of violence were reported. But this non-violence ‘for a different reason’ continued even much later. The two year term of the party in office and even the period from 1985 to 2001 has been drastic in nature so far as the functioning of the party is concerned. The incidents which had led to the ‘decline’ of the party have been gruesome and serious. The random spate of extortion, killings, corruption, maladministration, massacre, law and order problems can add to the long list of the fallout of the party. Due to rampant corruption, militancy and hence to tackle the same funds got diverted to the armed forces and made the state almost bankrupt. What should most importantly draw attention in the context of the study is the question as to who are the worst affected victims? There would be no denial of the fact that the violence had hit women and children the most. The problems besides resulting in serious political complications led to killings of common people of which women and children were the most causality. With the role of women as active agents of transformation in the society, the party

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78 The Assam Tribune, 13 January 1980.
rewarded this section with maximum loss to suffer. Now, what has been the role of the party’s women representative in this regard?

The role of a representative is all the numerous. Here are number of facets through which this can be understood. There is a ‘role perception’ which the representatives are supposed to carry out. But at the same time it has to be understood that the role or roles are dependent on a number of factors. One can identify factors such as the political culture under which they operate, the support of the political parties, expectations of the constituents of a constituency, the legislative system, and even the own ideas of the representatives on their role. This understanding is crucial for a clearer concept of representativeness. The role of the legislator is not confined to its constituency alone or to any kind of confinements. Having said this, therefore the ‘general’ role of women representatives too remains the same as the male legislators. There is a general view which common people hold of their legislators. In fact few women legislators of the present legislative assembly opined that the pressure on them as ‘problem solver’ is immense and this in a way increases the stress of legislation. The shortcomings which are inevitable are often used as a tool of justifying their shortcomings.

The incidents which involve greater importance to the state and the nation in general, happening during a specific period of time of the legislator is supposed to be taken into consideration. And more so if that is a woman’s issue. One of the roles of women who got into the central assembly or the provincial legislative assemblies or councils was supposed to bring desired legislation for women to elevate their status. There is no dearth of evidence to prove the various incidents after the AGP came to

power and even during its second term that changed the fate of the party. But with the faith in the ‘ability of bringing change’ the former women representatives of the party and even the senior women leaders of the party made clear that had there been a change in the leadership from the gender perspective, the party would have survived the virtual death.\textsuperscript{81}

In order to understand the role of the women representatives of the party from 1985 to 2001, the activities are categorized under general, which includes those issues which concerns the state as a whole, the women specific issues, issues on killings caused by violence etc. here a specific and separate section of women’s issues is constructed because of the unanimous opinion by the interviewees irrespective of the party, that the legislature is not only a space for legislating matters of general importance but also for women in particular. This is pertinent in the view that a woman has always been marginalized in politics which also led to the marginalization of their issues and concerns. The following table shows the issues which can be categorized under general questions, women issues and the kind of engagement women representatives got involved during the first term of its office. This will facilitate a proper understanding of the kind of activities carried out by the women representatives in the house. This also needs to be pointed out that there are different kinds of activities carried out in the floor of the house ranging from question hour to making resolutions.\textsuperscript{82}

And taking part in these activities fulfils the act of legislating for the representatives. It is to be noted that the party in opposition is said to be at the favourable most as they are to put up queries for the party in power to defend. The first term of the AGP saw no women into the seat of power, with two women in its second term. This suffices enough

\textsuperscript{81} The women members of the party accused the party leaders of undermining the concept of women and their ability to bring about changes even in politics.

\textsuperscript{82} On the rules of procedure see, Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business In Assam Legislative Assembly, 9\textsuperscript{th} Edition, Dispur,2004.
on the ‘expected’ role of the women representatives of the party. Therefore there were no women who headed a Ministry. Being maiden in their attempts the questions raised by the opposition seemed to be handled by the male leaders who themselves new, seemed capable than their women counterparts.

Table No. 2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions Asked During the AGP Rule (1985-1991)</th>
<th>Women Representatives Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGP (1985-1991)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General questions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s participation in general questions</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women related questions, questioned by the opposition women /male legislators(congress)</td>
<td>Women: 4 Male questioned on women issue: 2(1987)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Legislative Assembly Debates)

Table no. 2.2 shows that the number of issues which were discussed in the assembly during the above mentioned period. The number of sittings the Assembly had assembled for 251 days in a five year term of the government. It is to be pointed out that as the AGP came to power for the first time, with no women members to its credit, there is no activity of women from the party. Activity would mean taking part in the deliberations, discussions and legislating in the state legislature. The virtual absence of women from the legislature can be detrimental to women’s interests. Whatever activity could be seen were from the women members of the Indian National Congress who formed the opposition during the period and by the independent women members. The questions which are discussed are assumed to be raised on the overall social, political, cultural milieu of the state. It has to be remembered that the state of Assam and North East in general has been a region with specific and distinct problems unlike rest of the states.
This has been a region fraught with issues like militancy, insurgency, ethnic and communal riots etc. The state has been experiencing such related problems for a considerably long period. The impasse between the problems and peace still seems to be a far cry. The solution of which would be dependent on the kind of leadership that prevails in the state. But what could be seen from the table is the fact that the questions on the above mentioned issues had hardly surfaced. The issues categorized as general includes those issues which concerns the entire state and hence which are not constituency based. If the debates of the Legislative Assembly are carefully scrutinized one can see that the nature of questions raised in the house is mostly constituency based. The focus of representation is argued by Vir K Chopra in case of Indian MLA’s is their constituency and party. There are two aspects involved in it, one of the territorial and the other which revolves around individual constituents. Except during the discussion of a matter of urgency and calling for an attention motion, majority of the questions raised are on the constituency of the legislator who is raising the question. The question raised is on a particular department, example electricity, public works, health etc of a particular constituency. As the table shows that in the year 1987 the number of general issues discussed in the house was seventeen. This means that there were 17 issues discussed in the form of questions, calling attention motion, moving of bills etc. Now in the context of the study it is to see how many ‘women issues’ have been discussed and whether women legislators have taken part in it. From the period 1985 to 1991, there were only four women issues discussed in the house. And it is interesting to see that out of four issues discussed on women, two were questioned by the male legislators. This

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83 It was on 11.08.1986 that a male legislator raised the issue of gruesome ‘Nellie massacre’ in which more than 3000 people were killed consisting majority of women and children. For a detailed understanding see, Sanjib Barnah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, U.S.A: University of Pennsylvania Press,1999 and Hemendra Narayan, *25 Years On.. Nellie Still Haunts*, Guwahati: Nellie India Massacre Assam, 2008.
brings in question the much debated issue of men representing women’s issues or talking over it. While out of 17 general questions, women who raised, answered and questioned the same were thirteen (13). This shows that 76% has been the activity of women representatives on general issues compared to a 50% of women’s participation on women’s issues.

Table No. 2.3

Questions Asked During the AGP Time (1996-2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General questions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Women related issues, answered/questioned by the opposition women legislators/male | Women: (questioned) 16  
Women (answered): nil  
Male questioned on women issue: 1+1=2(1997, 2000) |

(Source: Assam Legislative Assembly Debates) The period following the first term of the party had much to learn besides many at least on the need of including women in its government. Though this was far from the expected number, yet it did manage to put up at least two of women in its government. But one of the two had previously run and even won her election as an independent, when rejected of a ticket to contest election from the party got accepted by the party and fought elections only to win it. Since then the representative has been working for the party and even headed a number of departments. The number of days that the Assembly was convened was for 270 times. From the table it can be seen that the issues of general importance increased to 42 compared to the first term of the party when it was 17 while the issues on women too got a fillip to 11 compared to 4 in the year 1985-1990. The table has shown a rise of both the general issues as well as the issues on women though in a very limited manner compared to the incidents that occurred after the first term of the party in office. In the
second year, the role of the women representatives in taking up and discussing and even initiating the general issues remains significant. Out of 42 general issues discussed, 39 of them had seen the participation of women, which comes to 92%. While on women’s issues out of 11, 9 issues were raised and discussed by women and only two issues were questioned by male representatives. But should draw our attention is the fewer number of questions in the floor of the house compared to the general and constituency based issues. In this term too, the role of the independent women has remained significant.

The role of women ‘in the house’ is extremely important to analyze so far as effectiveness of representation is to be understood. Needless to say the complexity of the activity played by a representative in the floor of the house so far as deliberating and discussing is concerned. But this role has far more implications than realized. The act of legislating is the exclusive concern of the legislature through which the legislature shows its supremacy. Legislative institutions, their organization and the manner in which the business of the house is being conducted, is argued to have major effects on the type of men and women who gets elected to it. Knowing the fact that the entry of women in such a space has been relatively recent, the various dynamics at work to carry out such an act is far more than complicated. A number of factors come to work then. One of them is the context in which the representative functions. Here the ‘context’ means the environment and the setting in which a representative works. The space which has been long dominated by male can be tempting to lead to an understanding that it might be un congenial for women who can still be said to be new to it. The

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86 One issue was on the crime on women committed during 1996, 97 and 98 which was questioned to the then Chief Minister (5-14 April 1999), Legislative Assembly Proceedings. The second issue was on provision of special scheme for women labourers in the tea gardens (6th April 2000) Legislative Assembly Proceedings.
87 Kunja, op. cit., p.213.
88 Donald R. Matthews, op. cit., p.573.
unsympathetic might surface because of the composition of the house. This means that as women constitutes a ‘minority’ as far as number is concerned. In a way it also tend
to mean that if there is a considerable ‘number’ of women in the house an environment builds in which generates a ‘comfortable’ environment to work. The way the house works is governed by certain rules and regulations. And every member of the legislature is bound by such rules as by subscribing such rules of procedure as it has a bearing on the image of the representative. The general rules of procedure and notice is dealt in chapter xxvi. And in it serial number 275 deals with the rules to be observed by the members of the house. Rule 279 deals with the rules of debates. Hence the rules are well laid down. Now, in order to understand the importance and its actual mode of working in the house, the views of the representatives who have been in the house undertaking these rules and regulations seems very crucial. But it has to be remembered that such an interpretation might be different for a male and a woman representative. The questions asked to the representatives give a clear picture of the ‘real’ mode of working among the members of the house. In addition to the questions asked there were few inputs which further help us understand the ‘difficult’ scenario in which the women representatives operate. It is interesting to note that during the respective tenure of the three representatives, there was enough respect among the male colleagues for their fellow women. But things become extremely tricky when it comes to making a point. There is a sense of ‘looking down upon’ the female representatives when there arises though rarely the woman representative differs from the party members. The interviewees agreed that it is extremely challenging for women representatives to

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., p.129.
93 The term has been used by the three respondents of the party.
command ‘respect’ for what they are suppose to do in the house. Persons, here the women, who can take up the challenge can stay on or else lead to their exit, voluntary or otherwise. 94 The following table shows the views of the three former women representatives of the AGP party who though very few in numbers viewed the ‘in house’ working. The analysis which follows from the table is a mixed one. The three women representatives from the AGP party seemed agreeable when it comes to accept that the legislature is still a male bastion even if they want to deny it, while the three representatives differed in opinion on other issues.

In relation to above mentioned discussion, what can be looked into for a more detailed understanding of the scenario is the socio economic status of the women representatives from the party. This is important to again see if there is any kind of relation between the variables chosen to indicate the socio economic status and getting into the seat of representation, co relating their acts for support of policies, perceptions and role with the same. For the purpose, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the variables used for the study of the same are the familial ties, caste, education, occupation. A number of studies have been made which studied these aspects while carrying out any study on women legislators. This helps for an in depth understanding also of the relationship of the women legislators and the society they come from. This seems to have a reciprocal relationship. The following is a discussion on the same.

94 Donald R Matthews, op. cit., p.573.
Table No. 2.4

Educational Background of the Women Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Number of Members</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Under Matric</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Matriculation and Higher Secondary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Post graduate (including other technical education)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Doctorate Degree Holders</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Field Work)

Explanation: The importance of education can be seen from the idea of Sidney Verba when she says that “education is still probably the single most important thing that underlines and ensures democracy.” How far it works in relation to women’s political representation is an intriguing question. Studies have shown the integral relationship between women’s political representation with the level of education. The fact that high illiteracy rates among women only leads to their disqualification as having no qualification to be a contenders in political recruitment by the political parties. As in case of India and other societies, Verba et.al opined that political participation and education was positively co related. Drawing a tone from such an idea, the scenario in case of Assam women representatives seems of a mixed nature. 50% of women

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representatives have passed the intermediate level while two woman representatives from the party were Master Degree holders and one had a Doctoral Degree to her credit. Though the percentage is less, yet the percentage of the graduate and above stands in 25% each which if taken together seems to be an encouraging one. Another aspect which can be linked to the education factor is the number of times these women representatives have been elected. One woman representative having a post graduate degree had won elections twice and even was in the cabinet rank while another two with an intermediate level education won twice and once consecutively. The representative with the doctoral degree had won elections only once, failing when she contested for the second time. At least there have been no illiterates from the party and can be assumed that the party fielded educated women representatives. This indicates the ability of these women representatives to comprehend the intricacies related with the act of representation.

Table No. 2.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Caste/Religion</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Other Backward Class</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Field Work)

Caste forms probably one of the most crucial determining factors in defining politics in India. Literature abounds on the relation between caste and gender in
The political parties are very careful when it comes to selection of candidates when it comes to run a seat and it seems to be more pronounced in case of women. AGP seems to practice a similar idea. Every political party has its social basis and it is through the membership of its members that we come to know whether it had adhered to a particular kind or not. As in case of AGP which laid down to an all inclusionary policy of including members to the party irrespective of class, caste, religion, language for carrying forward its goal, the composition of women seems to be an interesting one.

The four women members who have been representatives under the period of study are seen to indicate a mixed composition so far as their caste goes. There were two women who came from the general caste, constituting 50% of the total while one was from the schedule caste and one from the schedule tribe, indicating 25% each. It is very important to note that the women representative from the schedule tribe was not given a ticket to contest the election for the first time, when she wanted to contest the elections of 1985, because of which she had to run the election as an independent and even won the same year becoming the Minister of State of Social Welfare department. In the second instance she was given the ticket to contest from the party which she won and even served as the Cabinet Minister. Another matter which needs to be looked into is the fact of the number of times the woman representation is elected and its relation with the caste. From the table and even from the statistics available what could be seen is the woman representative from the ST status won twice and even had a Cabinet position to her credit. The women representatives each belonging to the general caste won once and twice consecutively. While, the woman representative from the reserved category managed to win only once. Therefore it seems that the party has given a mixed reaction to this aspect of caste and selection of women candidate from general or reserved

category. One of the interviewee opined that there is no such relation between caste of a woman candidate and emphasis is rather laid to the aspect of being a ‘woman’ than anything else. Contrasting to this opinion another woman representative who had won the seat from the reserved category seems to strongly support the idea there is a strong relation between caste and a woman candidate and coming from a reserved category and being a woman had helped he to win the elections as she represented the people of that reserved constituency. This strong example indicates one major debate of the aspect of ‘winnability’ which the women representatives have to confront more than often. It is not until that a woman representative shows the ‘capacity’ to win or even ‘win’, a political party shows every attitude of disinterested in fielding the woman candidate for elections. But again, if the woman representative loses the next elections, in spite of the hard work and the ‘efficiency’ she cultivated, the chances of ‘allowing’ that woman representatives for the second time becomes highly doubtful. Therefore there is a continuous and a vicious circle of ‘insecurity’ goes around. In so far as caste is concerned. There seems to be an all inclusive policy of the party so far as women are concerned, though with an ‘emphasis’ on the upper caste. So far as religion factor is concerned it is seen that all the women members elected from the party are of Hindu religion. The table showed above includes the women representatives only after the party’s second term till 2006. The party could only form government till the year 2001 but two women members could win seats from the party in 2001 and 2006 consecutively.

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99 Excerpt from the interview conducted on 15.02.2012.
100 Excerpt from the interview conducted on 27.03.2012.
101 Excerpt from the interview conducted on 15.02.2012.
Table No. 2.6

Family Linkage of the Women Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Family linkage as entry to politics</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Spousal Link/ link with political leaders/ coming from a political family etc.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Field Work)

Table no. 2.6 shows the family linkages of women representatives from the party. It is interesting to see that none of the women legislators came on an ‘independent’ basis. All the four women representatives either came from a family with a strong political basis or through either their spouses whose death ‘pushed’ them to join politics as their husbands already had the ‘trust’ of the people of the constituency.102 The interviewees commented that coming from a political background helped as they did not have to face the problems confronted by newcomers and hence did not have any political linkages.103 But one of the interviewee expressed the opinion that it was perhaps ‘easier’ to get elected in her maiden attempt after the death of her husband but when for consequent times, hard work and dedication remains deciding factors.104 This table very clearly shows that the party has not till date relied on a woman candidate who did not have any political linkages or is regarded as an ‘outsider’ who does not know the rules of the game and has to struggle harder than a fellow women candidate who has the knowledge of what ‘might’ goes on. This further can bring up new issues of a woman candidate’s ‘efficiency’ minus the family she comes from or what kind of influences would a family have on the political intention of a woman candidate?

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102 Excerpt from the interview conducted on 27.03.2012.
103 This is expressed by all the interviewed women leaders of the party.
104 Excerpt from the interview conducted on 15.02.2012.
Table No. 2.7

Occupation of the Women Representatives Prior to their Joining in Politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Politics only</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Field Work)

Table No. 2.7 shows the prior occupation of the women representatives from the party. One representative each was engaged in the teaching and social work activity. But 50%, which means two of the women representative were engaged in political activity because of the family and the spousal link. There were no women representatives who were home makers and joined politics ‘on their own’. This also indicates that the women representatives have been engaged in some form of public activities and have not been inside the four walls of the house. Though it might not have been an ‘employment’ in a traditional sense what can be emphasized here is the aspect of social integration which can help in developing self confidence and which in turn helps the political woman to gain political efficiency. These women have strongly indicated that they have been somewhat aware politically also, though they might not have had any legislative experience. From the interviews it could be seen that these women representatives were active in their own areas through active social service activities and being married to politicians or coming from a political background helped them to understand the problems of the people of their constituency and also being probably aware of the requirement of the basic understanding of ‘working for the

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people.\textsuperscript{106} This indicates the relation between women’s strong political engagement and representation.

**The Role of the AGP as an Opposition Party:** AGP had since its inception had played the role of opposition party in the legislature quite a number of times. It was in the opposition bench from the year 1991-96, 2001-06 and from 2006-2011. As already known the role of opposition is manifold. It is not only to curb the deleterious power of the ruling party but also to debate and discuss various matters of concern for the state which the ruling party might evade. So, when the party was at the opposition, the women representatives from the party too cannot be ignored from the discussion. Official record shows that since the party was in the opposition, there has been no women representative in the post of opposition leader.

It is often being argued that many a times the role of the opposition and its leader is of immense importance. Choosing a leader who is a ‘woman’ seems a reluctant affair for every party. The role of an opposition leader is enormous and holds immense significance. Usually in India an opposition leader is often a senior member of the party and it has been a rare instance when it has been a woman. So when a woman becomes the leader of the opposition, the importance might get increased because of the fact that since a long time, the legislature has always witnessed and experienced the functioning of male leaders who has a typical way of functioning.\textsuperscript{107} The ‘norm’ of sidelining a woman colleague by a male, is a regular feature almost in every country. The area of analyses is the role of the party both in supporting the question of representation of women as well as in facilitating the role of women in the debates and discussions which goes on in the state assembly. The nature of functioning of these bodies is often

\textsuperscript{106} Excerpt from the interview conducted on 27.03.2012.
\textsuperscript{107} This was opined by the three women representatives of the party.
criticized by the feminists to be very patriarchal. It is not only one single factor which determines the performance of a representative. The factor of gender which plays an important role in case of women representative cannot be ignored. The mere fact that a woman representative has to deal with the consequence of interplay of the external factors which affect representation with gender is crucial to the understanding of the performance of women representative in the Legislative Assembly.

The splitting up of parties in India is a regular feature. AGP too has not been spared of this exception. The defection of the party has occurred three times till date. But this split which was merged again in 2011. Even when the two parties operated and came back together again, yet the party failed to get back to power. The performance of the party has been a point of criticism for quite some time now. The criticism the party faced from all quarters is still continuing. There was a sense of disillusionment among the people who pinned high hopes on the party to mitigate their problems, but rather it got embroiled in the vote politics and in a number of ill happenings like maladministration, secret killings and corruption. In its hunger for power, the route chosen had led them nowhere. This is evident from the subsequent failure of the party to the seat of power. With much effort and massive manipulations, the party is still trying to make a comeback with all its efforts in the politics of the state from time to time. The party has been outspoken about its view point so far as its party issues and the various issues which emerged in the state is concerned. With these entire taking places, it was not thought a point to be stressed that the leadership of the party was at the hands of the male leaders. If we accept the view that there is a considerable change brought in

\[\ldots\]\n
\[\text{The first was in 1991 when the party splitted into two between Mr. Bhrigu Kumar Phukan who as said to be a rival of Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the second time was by Mr. Atul Bora who formed the Trinamool Gana Parishad and the third time Mr. Brindavan Goswami formed the Natun Asom Gana Parishad. The party came to be known as the Asom Gana Parishad (P) headed by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta.}\]
with women at leadership, then the party could have managed to swim across the turbulent phases at ease and manage to come back to power once again. As such with number of impediments faced by the women representatives, cultural and social structure influence women’s decisions to run for political office. And these obstacles continue to cause as much inconvenience possible to the proper functioning of the representativeness of the women legislators. As in case of Uganda and Bangladesh were, in the former country women were harassed in the parliament while the Islamic fundamentalists turn their backs during the speeches by female political leaders. This happens even when, after gaining office, cultural norms are argues to limit the effectiveness when dealing with their male counterparts. With the gradual decline of the functioning of the ‘Parliament’ at the national level which has come to fore in the last decade, the functioning of bodies where decision making is altogether a different ball game, much depends on the ‘nature’ the ‘space’ offers to the representative to make use of their representative capacity. With the growing importance of the declining nature of operations at the Parliament, the state legislatures aren’t too different from the former.

To conclude from the above discussion we can infer that the role of party towards women’s representation has been a limited one. The role has been limited because of the rigid gate keeping approach of the party which is evident in terms of candidate nomination and then finally supporting the woman candidate to win elections. The women representatives elected under the period of study seems to explicitly and unanimously agreed to the individual tenuous hard work involved in getting where they were. The party’s role was restricted even within the House. The party being

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111 *Ibid*.
112 *Ibid*.
predominantly male, women's independent attitude and having a strong mind was not seen with much appreciation. The number of women contenders from the party had not increased as it should have over the years, even though the party has been failing at winning elections in the recent past. As in the discussion carried above, there has been a mention of the paucity of women to join politics, an attempt is hence made not only to look into this fact through the socio economic status of the women representatives from the party but also understanding the factors which propel the party to nominate women for contesting elections. Moreover, an understanding of the social and economic status would also help at indicating the kind of issues that the women representatives from the party supported. A strong co relation can be establishes between women coming from political background and getting inducted in the party as members leading to become representatives and even holding rank of Cabinet Minister. If a separate evaluation of religion can be made, all the women members were from Hindu religion and none from religious minority group. The second in percentage which follows is the factor of caste and politics being which is seen to be 50% each. Therefore socio economic factors can be found to be the yardstick by the AGP in nominating women for elections. The electoral success of the party is also found to affect women’s representation. The question of electoral success actually had placed the inclusion of women or even making them win at a backstage. This means that the party takes these two issues separately. The party would only concentrate at the issue of women when it would have an electoral success and not otherwise. No thought has ever been given to the fact that with the growing importance and the reasonable performance of women as representatives, irrespective of their affiliation to any political party, the darker days of the party could change if the leadership rest with women of the party. Women’s issues have not been dealt with nor has there been any effort on the part of the party to change
their ‘strategy’ to deal with the myriad issues faced by the women of the state. Further, the role of the women representatives too seemed considerably limited so far as furthering women’s issues are concerned. Though the women representatives have been successful at highlighting the symbolic effects of representative, but their role in substantive representation is found to be inadequate.