Chapter-V
Role of Women Representatives in the State Legislative Assembly

The legislature as an important ‘space’ needs no exaggeration. The fact that it is one of the most important ‘space’ for the formulation of decisions, carrying out deliberations and eventually delivering the best service for the ‘people’. Having said this, the role of the policy formulators will hence be of immense important as a study. Studies on women representatives in a State Assembly have been very few. The difference between men and women in all forms of formal politics, in getting issues on the political agendas and in policy making and implementation, both in the First and the Third has come to be well documented now.\(^1\) World Support of such an idea had intrigued the feminist scholars in the sphere of politics and even in other otherwise to dwell into these differences and try to look if there is any unanimity in the conclusions found. Before any discussion on the same, it needs to be mentioned that the provision of incorporation of women’s representation in the Parliament or the state assemblies has been an offshoot of a hard toil of years by the feminist of the world. Therefore, it can be assumed that as it is hard achieved, best efforts would be made to practice it in the best possible manner. This is again not an easy task to achieve as it has been seen and argued many times that the institutions are ‘patriarchal’ in their nature and functioning, limiting the representative efficiency of the women representatives to a great extent. Under such circumstance what would be expected role of the women representatives. If the larger argument is to be accepted which talks primarily in terms of the ‘advantages’ the inclusion of women representatives would bring for the society as a whole the ground seems justifies of the increased participation of women in this aspect. What there is another dimension to this inclusion and that is what would this inclusion or greater

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number of women bring in for the ‘women’? What constitutes the role of the women representatives keeping in mind the ‘fewer’ number in almost all the countries of the world in comparison to the strength of the population? Besides these, how do they negotiate their legitimacy as representatives in this important ‘space’? These are some of intricate questions that the chapter intends to deal with in the context of women representatives of the Assam State Legislative Assembly. Studies have been carried out on the aspect of women’s representation in Assam, but needs to be looked into is ‘in which way’ has this aspect of representativeness been utilised by the women representatives of the state. Mere stating of the static, dwindling or the sloe upward graph in ‘numbers’ of the women representatives would not suffice or a detailed understanding of this complex situation. Focus is on the role the women representatives play in that ‘public space’ whose importance cannot be underplayed. It is also true that, women though being ‘new’ to this ‘space’ cannot jeopardize the responsibility they are entrusted. The problem compounds with the intricacies involved in the act of representation. This problem is visible irrespective of any countries. It can be argued that women in the Scandinavian countries, where women representation is exemplary for other countries, the aptitude for policy making has been learnt well all these years.\(^2\) However, for countries like India or any other third world country where representation is comparatively ‘new found’, it is no mean task for our women representative to deal with the details of legislation. Studies like one by Pradeep Chibber analysis the lower representation of women in the Parliament and the State Assemblies and attempted to understand the relation between political participation of women and their role in the family while concluding that women who negotiated their presence in the family were more likely to participate in the politics.\(^3\)


To understand the role of women representatives, a number of factors have to be understood. The ‘role’ is not an isolated term and it has a number of factors, which affects its working. And these factors go a long way in affecting the performance of the women representatives in a substantial manner. The behaviour patterns exhibited by women in local politics are suppressed by three interrelated institutional pressures like real politics, tokenism and institutional pressures. And female office holders have to deal with these wide varieties of pressures more than men. Amongst all the factors, the most important one is the ‘context’ in which the representative works. This is stressed because of the lower percentage of women in the legislatures of many of the countries of the world, especially the third world countries. Now, the question arises whether the low percentage of women actually indicates that the political institutions are patriarchal without considering other factors such as the role of the political parties, the culture, historical facts etc. that too plays important role in so far as functioning of the representatives are concerned. The impact of these individual factors differs in different countries depending how patriarchal the setting is where the representatives work. This variation in performance is observed in different countries.

A number of factors such as educational background, capacity and the support system created to help them, alliance building strategy, capacity of them in orienting their party structure to take up women’s issues and the external support of the women’s groups to them affects the functioning of women representatives. This in a way also affects the representative capacity of the representatives. To deliver the best for which they have been chosen, representatives and women seems to be hard pressed than ‘others’ when it comes to functioning in an almost all male domain, with higher

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5 Ibid.
expectations than the latter. The issue of expectations arises from the large female population who holds the fact that women representatives are to bring considerable changes to their lives. There is a serious debate on the issue of whether there can be serious changes in the political realm if there are considerable women representatives. Fiona Mackey argues that whether it is in the parliament or the legislature, in whatever proportion women are present, tipping point or critical mass, there is no translation of this presence into a substantive one, keeping in mind the ‘unstable’ category, women and their constable ‘interests’. This also brings in the question of the ‘critical mass’ theory which is important to make representativeness effective. But the question which arises is whether ‘critical mass’ is possible in every country and especially in a country like India where feminist and women members of the various political parties have been undergoing a struggle for providing 33% reservation for women in the National Parliament and the State Legislature. As in the present day when the bill is stuck in the Lower House for its final passing indicates the patriarchal elements involved in the intention of the political parties, the target of not only the feminist but even the women members of the political parties to have unrecognised the ‘need’ to bring such legislation into form. The women representatives in the Assam State Legislative Assembly do not constitute the critical mass. Even in the past, the assembly had never seen beyond the present percentage of around 11% which is much below the 33%. The chapter in order to understand the representative act of the women representatives would include the views of all the women representatives across parties under the period of study.

7 This view is expressed by 80% of the respondents.
9 The total number of women representatives interviewed, both of the past and the present, of all the parties is twenty three (23).
To carry out the activities in the Assembly the members are to follow certain
known as ‘parliamentary procedures’ which are inscribed in the Rules of Procedure.
There is also certain code of conduct like the parliamentary behaviour. In the recent past
the sessions of the even the Parliament and state assemblies had come to a halt with the
use of unparliamentary language, the members often the opposition leading to chaotic
situation in the House. This in a way affects the functioning of the legislature, which in
no means a ‘space’ to carry out issues which are frivolous in nature. The increase of
such activities affects the services to be delivered by the representatives. In fact many
respondents explicitly reported that the formality, legalism and officiousness of
parliament often divert the attention of the women representatives who wants to
otherwise in an effort to grapple with real issues. Again, it is also to be seen whether
these rules and regulations are ‘biased’ towards women representatives. For example,
many of the women respondents seemed to agree that besides the fact that the state
assembly with greater number of men turns the ‘space’ almost a male bastion with very
little for women to feel ‘comfortable’. The ‘context’ seems to be highly gendered.

This view is fundamental for further analysis of what actually goes in the House with
women members forming almost a small ‘group’. The interviewees opined that if
there is an increase in the number of women in the Assembly, the environment becomes
conducive to work. This indicates the implicit practice of male dominated politics.

One of the respondents, who once held the chair of a Deputy Speaker, emphasized on
the unchanging nature of the rules of conduct which many a times turns unfavourable to
a woman member. She further opined that the very way of addressing to the speaker

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11 This has been viewed by all the past and the present women members of the State Assembly.
12 Janice D. Yoder, “Making Leadership Work Effectively for Women”, Journal of Social Science,
Vol.57, No. 4, 2001, p.826.
13 This view was opined by 91% by the respondents.
14 Excerpt from an interview conducted with the women representative on 13.05.2012. She opined that
when she held the chair of the Deputy Speaker she could ‘sense’ the ‘uneasy’ attitude of the male
members while referring to the her as Madam Deputy Speaker.
should include both the terms ‘sir’ and ‘madam’. The point to be put across was that there it is time to use ‘gender-neutral’ terminology when conducting the business of the house. And in no ways there should be an ignorant attitude towards the presence of women in the house. As it is to be accepted that, a congenial environment can not only be helpful towards effective dispensation of responsibilities, but it can also add to the ‘comfort’ in a situation which is comparatively new to women. Alice H. Eagly and Mary C. Johannesen-Schmidt argues that because men has held the roles for so long, they defined the style and people have also accepted the same and become accustomed to it.  

Again, the importance of the male colleagues was also opined to be important to make the environment favourable for proper functioning in the House. One of the interviewee, who has been successful as an independent candidate, strongly stated that in her two terms in the Assembly, she experienced that the male colleagues often used to look down upon their female colleagues and play down on their ability when they speak on issues. Their support and co-operation though argued to be unfavourable often it cannot be ignored as it ‘can’ affect the working of the women representatives. It is true to the fact that men has been in the legislature and in the policy making much more than the women, but this does not in any way reduce the chances of women being inefficient representatives compared to their male counterparts The very contention that policymaking or politics as such is the prerogative of the male seems to be highly challenged now with women making way to the highest decision making bodies like the Parliament or the State Assembly.

The role of women representatives can be analyzed from a number of perspectives. They have to play not only the role of policy maker but also the role as leaders of opposition, the leader of the party in government, as members of the various

16 Excerpt from an interview conducted on 25.03.2012.
standing committees or any other committees formed from time to time. It is to be noted that even had to struggle hard to get to these portfolios. Whether it the role of committee members or being the leader of the opposition, the problem has always been to put in place what they want to. It has been widely accepted by the respondents that members of the opposition get to do more ‘talking’. Being in the opposition gives them the chance of ‘opposing’ the ruling party but the role of women is seen to be limited even when they are in the opposition. At present there is an only one women representative in the opposition.\(^{17}\) Training of course does not mean something new has to be taught altogether its, just that some tactics which might help them to solve the problem will only make the tasks easier for them. It is to be understood that even if women representatives go wrong ,it should be overlooked keeping in mind that they are relatively new to the ‘space’ and might need expertise to deal with the same.

The nature of issues discussed in a representative institution immensely important to look into. It is all the more in case of women representatives. There are different and wide views on the interest or policies women representatives support. Even though the equal opportunity to participate holds good for representation for women, yet there is a fear shared by many advocates of this argument with M. Sawer that there should be some utility of this representation which can be achieved when power holders can be converted to a cause.\(^{18}\) Even a number of feminist also argues that increase in the number of women legislators brings in different priorities and perspective to politics.\(^{19}\) Taking cue from such ideas, there is a great deal of literature which contends that women representatives are seen to be interested towards supporting

\(^{17}\) The women member is from the opposition party of All Indian United Democratic Front of the present Legislative Assembly.


women issues and even hold liberal policy opinions towards issues than their male colleagues because of their experiences and responsibilities in the private sphere. Women in state legislatures are more likely than men to give priority to bills focussing on women. On a similar note, women to a great extent and in different ways initiate, pursue and support issues concerning bio social production and reproduction, i.e, with issues like taking control and responsibility of people and other natural resources. But caution too seems in place when it is argued that to have substantive policy implications, differences between male and female will depend on the number of female members which should be certainly more than the mere token number which otherwise might lead women to conform to the practices and culture of the male colleagues. Presence of a considerable number of women colleagues, it would be easier for them to have the mutual support to make a difference in legislative conduct and output of legislative policies. When this question of having a mutual support was questioned, it is strangely interesting that 100% of the respondents expressed that whenever there has been a woman issue, there has been a unanimous support irrespective of political parties they were affiliated to, which according to few respondents stirs a cord of unity for being a woman and the responsibility to do something for the matter. It has its advantages too because such co operation also according to few respondents signals that any women issue cannot be brushed aside and should be dealt seriously. On the other side of the arguments are opinions which states that there is no difference between men and women representatives on different issues concerning women or otherwise.

23 Lynda Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 664.
24 *Ibid*.
25 10% of the respondents opined this.
Again, women’s interests might be context specific. Studies by Dabelko and Herrnso, Fox Larson, Niven and Zilber and Reingol indicates that they failed to find any significant differences between men and women so far as priorities, issues they support or even in the way they govern. In case of Poornima Mohan’s analysis of the role of women legislators of the West Bengal legislature, there is a mixed opinion on the same. While some of the respondents believed that they have their commitment to the wider electorate as a whole, there were some who believed that they have the moral responsibility towards highlighting the women’s problems and few declared that they had no special responsibility in respect of women’s problems. On a similar line women also disagree on many issues related ‘directly’ to women, ranging from reproduction rights and family law. Again, it is also about one’s area of interest, which for women is often the women and children and they think it to be their moral responsibility to bring forth such issues. But again, why is that it is only the women who thinks so? On being questioned of this major issue of supporting, taking up and initiating women’s issues in the House, 90% of interviewees replied in affirmative opining that they being a woman has the responsibility to work for the women. And with considerable number of women representatives being engaged in social service prior to getting elected, was closely involved with matters dealing with women and


32 Purnima Mohan, Encyclopedia of Women, New Delhi: Indian Publisher’s Distributor’s, 2000.


children of their area. They opined that another reason for supporting women’s issues even within the women’s wings of the party and taking it over to the Assembly is because of the invisibility of women’s issues in the House by the male members. Majority of the respondents opined that there are many issues that the people of the constituency to which the representative belong faces ranging from electricity, water, drainage, education, crime to name a few and so it would be incorrect on the part of the women representative to deal ‘only’ with the women issues. Therefore the way out could be to ‘prioritize’ the issues of women of the constituency or of the state in general at the same time dealing with different issues at the same time. This indicated the importance of a ‘constituency based’ politics that is in practice. According to a few respondents, there should be equal participation of men and women on women’s issues. Emphasizing on the constituency based politics; Sarah Poggione argues that if men and women are elected from the similar type of constituencies than there is a probability of them holding a similar view. This leads to the argument that if constituency based politics becomes a priority over gender, than larger number of women getting elected to the state legislature and bringing about changes in the policies adopted in these institutions remains erroneous. On the contrary, Hannah Riley Bowles argues that the negotiating capacity of women for others than for themselves is much more than the men and that they are ‘fabulous advocates of their constituents’. The question which seems to trouble a majority of the women members interviewed is of having a ‘procedure’ of bringing up issues which seems to restrict the freedom of the women members to discuss women’s issues. According to 90% of the women members, supporting “only” women’s issues tend to be looked in as a ‘shortcoming’ when it

35 90% of the respondets opined this.
36 Sarah Poggione, op. cit., p.306.
37 Ibid.
39 This view is given by 75% of the respondents.
comes to nomination of women by the political parties. This is at this stage that the woman members seem to compromise for ‘larger benefits’. Marion Sanders decried the popular notion among women is that “politics and government are just housekeeping in larger scale.” This dominant idea hence needs to be changed if women’s representation is to be understood in terms of its all inclusive nature.

The representative capacity of women can be gauged from the effectiveness of the representativeness of the women representatives. It is argued that effectiveness if often equated with power. But it is again difficult to ascertain ‘power’. Carrying out the activities related with this capacity like taking active part in the deliberations, sponsoring and introducing bills, being the chairperson of the house, being the leader of the party in power or in the opposition can seem to be powerful acts keeping in mind the importance of the act of representation. All these are no less important roles which shows the how is this ‘space’ used for effective representation by women. The above mentioned activities clearly indicates that in order to carry them out, there is undeniable need of taking active part in the legislature and mere ‘passive’ role would not suffice. It can be argued that presence is important, but in order to make representation effective active participation of women in a space like the legislature is undeniable. Even if there is a larger presence of women in the legislature or if critical mass is achieved such an exercise may not be seen if there is no concerted effort on the part of the women members. The point to be made here is that there is that numbers might not matter as the ideas do. This again can be true for countries where a certain level of representation has consistently been achieved. But this may not be true for countries which are still in phase of reaching the point of achieving the critical mass whose importance cannot be ignored at all. The whole issue of representation seems to revolve around achieving this.

40 Excerpt from the interviewees conducted.
Different thoughts are put across the importance of the phenomenon of critical mass and its utility.\textsuperscript{42} The common ground is the need of the ‘presence’, which is important to precede the ‘ideas’. If there is no presence, there again can be no ideas.

Debates on which ideas to advance has become a serious issue. In the context of Assam, the Assam Assembly as a ‘space’ of serious deliberations has also come true. Keeping in mind the political and social history of the state, the state legislature has come to be a space to discuss various issues and from people across sections. As far as women’s presence in this ‘space’ is concerned, the chapter attempts to understand the underlying dimension of representation. A normal understanding of this space is the formal function of policymaking. However, this space is much more than a space for making crucial decisions. Here, representatives are involved in serious debates and discussions, which seem to lead to a certain kind of development of relations that have gender implications influencing the succeeding relations between the members of the house. This is so because whatever may be the form of conduct amongst the members, there is a serious implication of it when it comes to women. Being a ‘minority’, carrying out business in the house entails sincere and forceful efforts on the part of women representatives. There is also the question of the ‘size of the minority’,\textsuperscript{43} which Rosabeth Moss Kanter talks of and which determines the conduct of business in the house. According to her, the proportion of two social categories, men and women here, makes an important difference.\textsuperscript{44}In the Assam legislature too, women too forms a minority but the size of the minority is important. In case of the ‘tilted group’ where the minority becomes influential can have some bearing on the bargaining capacity of women representatives. It is often argued that in conducting relations inside the house one cannot ignore the strong patriarchal tendencies that tries to operate.

\textsuperscript{42} The assumption of the critical mass theory states that more women in the legislature more will lead to more women related legislation.
\textsuperscript{43} On this see, Sarah Childs, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{44} On this see, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, \textit{Men and Women of the Corporation}, USA:1977.
The overall performance of women representatives is not an isolated job. They have manifold functions to perform. A number of ‘external factors’ also affects the proper functioning of these women representatives. Such factors seem to work also at the various committee levels. There are number of committees, in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, called the standing committees, which perform crucial work transacted to these bodies by the legislature to save time for taking up more matters in hand. A number of ‘committees’ also characterizes the Assam legislature. The word ‘committee’ is mentioned in chapter XXV of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business of the Assam Legislative Assembly. Here committees mean the Assembly Committees. Growth business, led to the formation of a number of committees form time to time. The importance of these committees can be gauged form the fact that these are the ones which are actually delegated most of the crucial work. In Assam legislature there are 16 committees along with departmentally related standing committees. As laid down in the rulebook, the duration of these committees is one year from the date of constituting the committee. It is difficult to ascertain, the importance of any one committee, as each of the committees performs particular and specific tasks. The selection of members to these committees is also crucial because the membership to it is limited. The appointment is done either by election or nomination by the speaker. The role of the male leaders of the party cannot be ruled out in ‘advising’ which women representative from their party should be included in which committee. The fact that each of these committees has its own importance, it is difficult to ascertain which of these amongst

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45 The respondents interviewed said that many external factors like the prescribed rules and regulations, the support of the male colleagues in the floor of the house and to make a point without intervention etc. are important for effective functioning of women representatives.
46 Shanta Bhatt, Women Parliamentarians of India, Udaipur: Shiva Publishers Distributors, p.150.
47 Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Assam Legislative Assembly, edition.9, Dispur: Assam Legislative Assembly Secretariat, p.94.
48 Ibid., p.96.
49 The membership of the committees is as near as one-third of the total number of members of the committee.
50 This view was expressed by 8 women representatives of the present Legislative Assembly belonging to the Indian National Congress.
them are important. So, for our purpose of study all the committees are included. So far as the present picture goes, the percentage of women being far less than expected, the inclusion of women in these committees is important to dwell on. Moreover, another constraint over the membership of these committees is that, a member if appointed a minister cannot be a member of the committee. As this being the case, the membership of these committees would not be preferred than the minister ship. This is an important question. It is a big question whether being a member of these committees does any benefit as far as their role of representatives is concerned. Whether any of the members can choose to be in a particular committee is also a question, because there is a point where the appointed members can even put down the offer of being a member to any of these committees. How far the functioning of these committees are ‘women friendly’? Whether the women representatives who are members of these committees have greater discretion in these committees? On these questions majority of interviewees responded that these committees are extremely crucial for the women representatives in the form of ‘training’ keeping in mind the importance of the committees in the Assembly and the substantial work that goes in these committees. While some in a latent manner expressed that being a member of the committees actually do not contribute to the representative performance. But as it is essential to be a part of it, it turns out to be a mere practice without much intention. The presentation of reports by the committees is an important feature of the sessions of the legislature. If headed by a woman representative, the work has a symbolic effect to it.

Another important aspect of these committees is the initiative taken by the women representatives in the formation of these committees. This is especially important in case of the Committee on Welfare of Women and Children. This committee was formed in the year 1998. It is important to see how the committee was

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51 80% of the respondents opined this view.
born. There was a great deal of discussion on the empowerment of women both in the media and in the parliamentary foray. The matter was discussed in the meeting of the presiding officers of the legislative bodies of the country in Shimla in 1977, which requested each state legislature and the parliament for insertion of rule for constituting a committee which can take up the matter. The Rules Committee in its second report, presented to the Assam Legislative Assembly on 21st August 1997 recommended for the formation of a committee as ‘Committee on Empowerment of Women’. The committee was renamed to “Committee on the Welfare of women and Children” on 19th December 2003. At present, all the women legislators of the assembly are the members of the committee. The committee when formed had both male and female legislators as members as well as members from the secretariat. The committee has its own rules of procedure for its convenience. The importance of the role of the committee can be gauged form the fact that it entertains matters, complaints, petitions from the members of Assam state legislative assembly, social organizations, public or individual relating to the security equality and improving the status and conditions and dignity of women in all matters for redressal of grievances. The committee’s first report was on Smt. Rinasree Pamegam, of the Sonitpur district of Assam, who was deserted by her husband.\textsuperscript{52} The provision that the reports of the committee has to be presented to the legislature for discussion enable the scope to the members not only to be informed of the various problems confronted by women in the state, but also to work out solutions on the same. But if we look at the debates of the legislature, of the period under study, we get a rather dark picture. There has been extremely less issues of women discussed in the floor of the house. When asked of the reasons, most of the legislators agreeing to the fact said, that as there is a process\textsuperscript{53} of selection of topics to be raised in the house,

\textsuperscript{52} First report of The Committee on Empowerment of Women, Dispur: Assam Legislative Assembly, 10th Assembly, 1999.

\textsuperscript{53} There is a lottery system through which a number of questions relating to different department like electricity, roads, welfare etc of a specific constituency are put together and only one of them is being
the women legislators seemed optimistic about bringing more issues for discussions, which otherwise would be left neglected. The committee is required to present its report on an annual basis to the legislature. It is interesting to note that most of the times; the committee was headed by a woman representative. This is important to note because, as argued by most of the feminists, that the department as ‘this’, do not fall in the category of ‘important and weighty’ departments. And so, women as mostly assumed to be ‘weak’ at understanding the ‘real work’ of weighty departments are hence entrusted with the work of committees as this. The composition of the committees is important to analyze because it is after all the interaction among the members which will eventually determine the mode of business of the committee. The different issues which are brought up in the committee point to nature of problems which arise in the state regarding women. It is pertinent to mention here, that though there have been a number of proposals for setting up a different department for women, yet it has still not materialized and clubbed under the social welfare department. This can be said to indicate a negative attitude of the government towards women and their welfare. This has been a common sight even at the national politics. Mention can be made of the State Women Commission which came to force in 1974. The work of the commission towards women is extremely important to mention. It is not only a body which works for the socio economic upliftment of the women in the state but also, has a political role to play. The Commission does not have the right to support any women, who is nominated by any party for nomination, as it is not a political body, yet it always voiced out its concern for making the women of the state politically aware and knowledgeable. The role of the Commission is important so far as the role of a women’s movement in facilitating political representation of women goes. This has been underlined by many studies that a strong women’s movement is necessary for greater chosen to be placed in the legislature. This restricts the various issues to be placed in the legislature of a particular constituency.
presence of women in the decision making bodies. The composition of the Commission should be a non political one which can deliver its services without any part bias and hence autonomous. In fact there was news about the commission being ‘political’ which according to one of the members has severely affected the working of the commission. The commission as mentioned in the constitution has tremendous responsibility towards all round development of women in the state.

Another way through which the effectiveness of women representatives can be analyses is through their role as ‘ministers’ of certain departments. There are a number of departments in the government of Assam. And if carefully examined, women did not feature holding important portfolios. This seems to be a regular and a disturbing practice off late. It can be argued that though the period following change of power from Congress to the Janta party or to the AGP, saw a small number of women in the legislature, but when the Congress came back to power, there was a slender increase in the percentage of women. But yet, the government hardly saw any subsequent increase in women holding portfolios. There were two issues related to this. First, the minuscule number of women holding portfolios and second, if given, women are seen holding ‘weaker’ portfolios. When questioned on such a practice there was an ‘almost’ unanimous acceptance that there is nothing like a ‘strong’ or a ‘weak’ portfolio but the responsibility of a woman heading a department is enormous and has to carry out same efforts for every department. But again, there was certainly an implicit agreement on the practice of ‘not giving the powerful posts’ to women. A certain percentage answered to the Chief Minister’s discretion at allocating portfolio’s to the winning candidates in the Government. Such a practice of often giving a woman representative the responsibility of departments like social welfare, women and children issues, cultural affairs, handlooms etc., seems to be intrinsically linked to the ‘functional theory

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54 100% of the respondents opined this view.
55 90% of the respondents agreed to this view.
about the division of labour’ as said by S.Pandey\textsuperscript{56}, which replaced the old theory of female incapacity. This means that women can only handle issues related with them or children. Because of qualities like caring, compassionate, loving which is said to be the ‘primary characteristics’ of women, unlike aggressiveness or force which is important to carry out ‘real politics’. Few women also viewed the idea of ‘efficiency’ to hold important posts, as they expressed that they are all left to their own to inculcate this efficiency in the business of legislation. For this section of interviewees there was no difference between holding a portfolio and serving their constituency. What mattered to them was a broader and a comprehensive understanding of the act of representation. Now the question which might arise is that if the make decision making is in the hands of a male, whether there are any chances of women getting into ‘seats of power’ This opens up another dimension that whether a woman in the seat of power facilitates fellow women to have a similar position? Such an idea was greatly supported by the liberals, who only supported the idea of ‘working within the system’. There was no major shift from the idea unless this idea seems to lead nowhere. There was an increasing voice to bring about real changes. According to Jannet Flamming, the difference between women’s feminist philosophy and their limited power to bring about real changes is because of the existence of institutional sexism, which systematically excludes women from political power and prestige.\textsuperscript{57} In this way the feminists have argued that unless and until women get into the inner circles of power, mere ‘being there’ is not going to yield enough. In the context of the study, inner circles of power would mean holding positions where power yield enough. But this was not accepted by most of the women representatives, who viewed ‘power’ as working for the welfare of the people of the constituency than holding a ministerial portfolio. According to the women representatives, the demands are much more serious, grave and immediate. The

\textsuperscript{57} Janet, op.cit., p.36.
amount of effort to be given to retain their seats as representatives is much more difficult and incomparable with any other factor.

Women in Assam were more often seen to occupy portfolios which fell into the ‘weaker’ category. If this dichotomy is to be accepted that there are ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ posts, then women always fell into the latter. As in case of women who held different portfolios in different capacity either during the rule of the Congress or the AGP, the scenario remained the scene. Fewer as they were, the few AGP, women held the social welfare, sericulture, handloom and textile, cultural affairs portfolios. As in case of women during the Congress regime, it was mostly in the post of the ‘non-powerful’ portfolios that women were seen as Ministers. Moreover there is also the question of ‘capacity’ which is more so defined by the CM, whom he intends to allocate which department. Under such circumstances the women representatives\(^{58}\) opined that they cannot suggest themselves for the posts. Having said that, it shows that this too is decided by the party head who is more often a male, who will decide the effectiveness of the women representatives because if we assume that more powerful the portfolio is, powerful is the women representative. The respondents hold a different kind of perspective on ideas like ‘power’ and ‘efficiency’\(^{59}\). Though many of them have agreed to have come late comparatively and needs to develop more in the realm of policy making, yet they do not feel powerless even though they did not hold any office. It is also true that even if women representatives are not holding any posts, their effectiveness does not come down. For the respondents, working for their constituency was primary than any other factor.

\(^{58}\) This was viewed by the women members who held portfolios during their party’s rule.

\(^{59}\) A few women members opined that power and efficiency would mean getting the work done in the House and even otherwise. This is said to a hard task with women being a small numbers.
**Issue of Language Problem in Assam:**

For the purpose of discussion on evaluating the effectiveness of the representative capacity of women representatives in the Assembly, two issues are taken in the study. If the argument from the above can be drawn on the difference between women and non-women issues, then picking up of the two issues the language and the illegal migrant issue can be said to be justified. In the Assam political scenario, since independence, there took place certain incidents which contributed to the change of the entire socio-political future of the state. Of the major issues that informed the culture and politics of post-independence Assam, none (other than the issue of immigration) perhaps acquired the kind of centrality that language did. Literature on these two issues abounds. The literature mostly has mostly dealt with aspects related to the origin and the effects, consequences of these issues. But none of the literature has ever looked into the aspect of gender question which is deeply involved in it. As a matter of fact, the latter is intricately related in so far as the consequence of the violence created by these two issues is concerned. Plainly speaking, any violence which took place in the state of Assam, the causalities more than often has been women and children. And in order to understand these issues from gender lens, the role of the women representatives can probably throw enough light on the discussion which followed in the State Assembly during the period under study.

**Issue of Illegal Migration in Assam:**

Intertwining of language and immigration is immensely crucial to the understanding of politics in Assam. The discussion which follows is to be understood independently and then in a combined manner for a better insight. To start with the language issue, India is

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undeniably a multilingual and multicultural society. This multiplicity obviously did not but had led to conflicts and problems. The most often observed conflict had surfaced primarily because of the domination of one language over the other. This has been in the country as a whole as well as in states. Even in a particular state there are different linguistic groups and even beyond, there are smaller linguistic communities in each such group. Therefore contradictions and conflicts are inevitable. In case of North East India and it is all the more baffling. The existence of a large number of communities speaking different language and ‘managing’ a peaceful scenario has been challenging for the leaders of the state. As the multilingual nature of the state has become a stark reality, at that point it would not be easy to expect the state to be turned into a unilingual one. This problem seems to continue from the past when the matter though existed was not explicitly expressed. The British used the regional differences for their own benefit and which later led to serious conflicts. The conflict between the major linguistic communities of Assam, the Assamese and the Bengalis seemed toughest. The conflict took many forms and had shaped into actions like from the issue of giving precedence to one of the two languages on being the official language of the state, the medium of instruction in the schools, the language to be used in dealing with matters in areas even where these two languages were not been spoken etc. Related to it was the case of Assamese nationality formation for which the language was the symbol of unification and spiritual bonding. In contrast to it was the language of the vast majority of Bengali population which had not been resident of the state for a long period with the emphatic demand of the supremacy of their language and demand to make it the official language of the state. As termed by the Bengalis as ‘Matri Basha’ meaning the mother tongue, was beyond just from being a medium of expression. The language issue left a deep impact on the social, political and cultural milieu of the state. In 1960’s Bimala Prashad

Chaliha, the then Chief Minister of Assam in one of the Assembly Session held on 3\textsuperscript{rd} March 1960 discoursed on making Assamese the official language of the state. This was strongly resented by the non-Assamese speaking population of the state and the Bengalis living in the Cachar where a large majority of Bengali speaking resided. In the name of protecting language, repeated attempts which of course failed were made to name the Silchar Railway Station as Bhasha Shahid Station.\footnote{Ibid.} The Bengali populace lamented the negligence on the part of the state as well as the Bengali speaking population on the lack of interest and efforts to make the 19\textsuperscript{th} March the International Mother Tongue Day.\footnote{Ibid.} The phase which followed thereafter was characterised by conflicts, riots and chaos. Divided into three sections of the protestors, the police and the pro Assam Language Act supporters seemed to be in clash with each other. The whole state was under widespread opposition to each other on the matter. Even after the granting of official language status to Bengal in the district of Cachar after due amendment, the resentment from the Assamese civil society and from other sections of the society continued. This was seen in the language riots of 1972 and 1986.\footnote{Ibid.} Demands as these only facilitated further confrontation. The conflict which has its origin during the British period continued to have its effect in the consequent course of politics then which had many issues like nationality, identity, especially linguistic identity etc tangles with it. This can be said to be what happened in the house on language.

**Discussions in the House:** Keeping in view the importance of the issue, discussion on such in the state assembly is obvious. But this can only be established after making a detail study on the importance of the issue through the discussion taken up by the representatives, especially the women representatives. Though the issue of language can be traced before 1975, therefore a look into the previous debates is required. The co
relation between the two can be made, from the point of view of participation of women representatives on the issue. It needs to be mentioned here, that the number of women representatives during the active phase of language movement in the state, i.e., from 1962 to 1975 was 8 and which all of them belonged to the Congress party. Trace of the issue can be seen from the debates which went on in the state legislature during the 1960’s and continued to become one of the most sensitive issues during that period. The importance of the issue as can be seen being enormous was not be ignored by the women representatives. Drawing from the fact that large number of women not only participated in the movement, and death was what many women even faced failed the women representatives to bring forth the issue and discuss the same in a more extensive manner. It is not the matter of the linguistic conflict that a state undergoes, but that are associated problems too which conflicts based on linguistic differences brings about. The most important being the illegal migrant issue which is discussed later here.

Intricately related to the language issue which seemed to hold some importance in the discussion in the house for a few couple of times is the issue of preserving the mother tongue of different communities and ethnic groups in the state by establishing the vernacular medium of instruction. This idea contradicts the fact that imposition of one language as a whole in a country or a state to be detrimental to the growth as well as progress of the language of the minority groups. Post independent era had seen a number of struggles for linguistic, cultural, political and economic autonomy and which the Indian state had even brutally repressed. But in the present scenario where there are number of groups in the state demanding the right to self determination, on the linguistic basis primarily, coercion and repression doubts to be the rule of the day. But violence took place with the death of many and turmoil creating a chaotic situation. But such discussions were never taken cognisance of. Fewer were the discussions on it.

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65 Miri, _op cit._, p.28.
Stressing on the nature of impact the grievances the language problem brought up, besides being an economic one, the language problem became a tool to articulate the emotion and experience of the marginality and peripheralization. If we look at the debates of the Assembly it can be seen that the issue of language under the period of study was discussed in various sessions for a meagre number of eight (8) times. And this has been a surprising fact keeping in view of its importance and its ramification in the social, cultural and political sphere of the state. Besides this reality, another aspect which seems most important for the study is the participation of women in this issue. It can be seen that four questions were raised in 1998 and 2000 consecutively and in which two women representatives, each participated. While in the previous years from 1964 to 1987 there were again four major issues of language problem discussed in the house but by the male leaders. What could be derived from this statistical information is that the women representatives who participated in the discussion were from the congress party (two of them) and one independent women candidate. This seems to be an abysmally low in totality of the number of times the issue was discussed while the participation can be said to be ‘good’ as from 1998 to 2006 the four questions raised were by the women representatives. (Identifying similar such issues in the recent years, there have been only a few. Instances when language issue or matters related to it like the medium of instructions in schools of the state arises. Learning of one’s mother tongue in an otherwise school where the medium of instruction is different has been discussed in the legislature for a number of times. Such issues are not ideologically confined to the matter of just being a matter of medium of writing, but have many factors like one’s affinity to a particular language and its need of preservation. And women through their efforts in the language movement and even much latter when this particular issue

67 There are only four instances under the period of study that the problem of medium of instruction was discussed.
stemmed out landmark issues like the immigrant and the infamous Assam movement involved themselves more than any other ‘group’. It is often argued that the issues mentioned above are said to be offshoot of the language problem. As for example, the medium of instruction in schools is a serious problem faced by the state in the present times. There is a growing sense of assertiveness of the different linguistic identity of smaller communities in the state for a considerable time now. The state from time to time has been facing a continuous challenge to linguistic affinity between people from different communities which have surfaced in the state and often leading to massive conflicts. And language was the crux of the conflicts. These kind of conflicts had only accelerated over the years leading to not only changes in the political scenario with the emergence of new demands from the new leaders of the groups formed for ‘preserving and protecting’ their linguistic identity. In Assam, organisations like the Nikhil Assam Banga Bhasha-Bhashi Samiti, Sangram Parishad, Cachar Zila Gana Sangram Parishad intensified their protest against the Language Bill. The same was carried out by the District Congress Committee which formed the Basha Andolan Committee in attempt to make the bill come true. Severe attempts were made by the parties, the supporters and the protesters for the same. As like any other movement, even the language problem saw the dynamic participation of the civil society comprising of students, intellectuals and even ‘women’. But this seems to be ignored in the analysis of the event. This though been a regular feature in case of most of major happenings in any country, yet this continues even today. The mere mentioning of the name of the women martyr does not suffice or even more that women participated to protect ‘their’ language in Assam. The veteran Congress leader Nalinibala Devi, exerted efforts for the cause of the movement and even handed over a letter to Nehru which contained the opinion of the people on the matter.68 This clearly indicates the involvement of women in varied issues

which came up from time to time in the state. The point emphasized is the ‘role’ women played in this issue and even dared to lay down their lives. Language can be said to be probably one of the most important component when expression is concerned. In order to express one’s experiences, ideas and thoughts language is undeniably the fundamental medium of expression.

The two interviews conducted on the representatives of the state of Silchar of the present legislative Assembly indicated an idea that as language is a very sensitive issue, efforts are made to sideline it and hence only those issues which are indirectly related to the core issue of language is taken into consideration. They agreed to the virtual absence of the language issue discussed in the State Assembly by the women representatives and the assembly to the reduced to a mere ground of ‘local matters’.

Women in all social and political movements have not only participated effectively but even became victims of lathi charges, killings and imprisoned on many occasions. Even during the ‘Basha Andolan’ large number of women participated with immense zest and zeal. Many of them were even killed. The first martyr of the Andolan, Kamala Bhattacharjee was a woman. Such was the fervour for protecting, Matri Basha. Discussion on issues like language hardly featured in the legislature

The frequency in which the language issue featured in the proceedings of the debates under the period of study shows the belittling of such a potent issue which influences so many other factors in the state. The first instance of it has been during the chief minister ship of Fakaruddin Ali ahmed, in the State Legislature (continuance of the English language) Bill 1964. During the period 1962-67, there were four women

69 Interview with the two representatives of Silchar was conducted on 06.05.2012 and 25.06.2012.
70 The infamous Incident of 19 May 1961, Silchar, “A brief Reconnoitre of its context and condition.”
http://wethepeople-barakvalley.com/bhasha-shahid-divas-language-martyrs%E2%80%99-day/843
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
representatives, who mainly represented the INC and what could be seen from the proceedings is that they took active part in the debates when this issue came up. After a considerable long gap, the issue of language was found to be discussed during the AGP rule.\(^{73}\) The area of discussion in the field of education has concentrated mainly on the provincialisation of schools, appointment of teachers in lower, middle and high schools of the state. But again the state has also not seen much after the late 1980’s on the issue of language. The emergence of smaller communities and their assertion of preserving and furthering their own language and script seem to be well facilitated by the governments in power. More than the specific issue of the language problem much of the debates revolved around the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. Mention can be made of discussions on the use of Santali language in Assam as the M.I.L,\(^ {74}\) propagation of Assamese language among non Assamese people,\(^ {75}\) and the need to emphasize on the regional languages and keeping intact the three language formula\(^ {76}\) etc. What needs to be mentioned here is that the discussions which were carried out were from the male members of the assembly than the female members. The Assembly had seen women members coming in from different linguistic groups over the period of time yet there were very few discussions on the language issue even women members besides the focal point of the language issue being discussed in a very minimalistic manner. These two issues should again not be understood in isolation. If it imperative to think the intersection of linguistic identity and gender. It cannot be denied that women often face the dual oppression of being a minority and even belonging to a specific linguistic minority group in some cases. This complicates the situation more.

\(^{73}\) The first was the discussion on the propagation of Assamese language among non –Assamese people.(23.03.1987) The second time it was being discussed was when there was a voting on demand for grants for education and in the discussion on the same the importance of regional language as a medium of instruction and to continue the three language formula was stressed,(27.03.1987). The last discussion on it came to be seen as impact of Santali language in Assam as an M.I. L subject (21.03.1989).

\(^{74}\) Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 21.03.1989.

\(^{75}\) Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 23.03.1987.

\(^{76}\) Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, 27.03.1987.
In Assam, Assamese is used as the official language for carrying out activities. Efforts to make Assamese the official language of the state has a long history which started with the coming of British. After all eventualities what can be seen today is the use of the Assamese, Hindi, English and Bengali in the State Assembly for conducting business. Now the fact that the use of these languages has been provided, implies of a more progressive ‘politics’ at play. The rigidity of following a particular language is neither possible nor seem to be desirable in the present times. This has also much to do with the smaller linguistic groups coming in to share power in the state. Drawing from the past, it could be seen from the debates carried out that there is no attempt being made to impose a particular language in the state rather an attitude of co existence of different languages is rather stressed. The result of such an attitude can be seen among the women representatives. According to them language is a major medium through which communication is conducted. One of the women representatives interviewed who represented the BTAD area commented on the use of the language of Assamese at ease, without it being her mother tongue and the stressed the need to cultivate the skill of an able orator which gives an added advantage to the act of deliberation in the Assembly. This is important according to the legislator, because unless an idea is presented in a lucid manner the importance of the issue might get diminished. The analysis which resulted from the interviewees on the language and its related issue revealed that there was a common idea of the issue being very sensitive and seems that every attempt is being made individually by the legislator to be ‘careful’ of the language being used in the Assembly and more so by the representatives whose mother tongue has not been Assamese. Moreover, there was also a view among some of the women representatives that as the issue of language is a highly sensitive one, it was also

77 Yasmin Saikia, op. cit., p.60
78 Excerpt from interview conducted on 25.03.2012.
79 Ibid.
80 Three women respondents, one from the AGP and two from the Bodoland Peoples Front.
‘avoided’ as a matter of discussion.\textsuperscript{81} Some of them even mentioned of the space to discuss much more ‘important’ issues than the language issue which is accused to be blown out of proportion by the minority linguistic groups. While a certain number dismissed the over emphasized problem of language and opined that the major point was not of what language is being spoken to get the work done in the assembly, so far as one of the above mentioned languages are used and the representatives are carrying out the duty as they are expected to do. Robbins Burling pointed out the controversy over the issue of language is understood as an argument over power and politics rather than language.\textsuperscript{82} He further argued that commonalities of the languages will be pointed out if the goal is to have unity and state differences to assert disunity.\textsuperscript{83} There are two views involved, one demanding a unilingual state wherein one language would be used indicating a unified state and hence defying the fact that recognition of various languages would only weaken the state unity. On the other hand if the minority languages are not given the environment to develop and progress, the hegemonic nature of state seems to be at play. The interviews suggested that rather than the issue of language is underplayed for safer reasons. There is an approach of accommodation rather than confrontation. Though the state from time to time has seen numerous incidents of clashes on linguistic basis,\textsuperscript{84} yet there has been very rare discussion on it. Moreover most of the interviewees expressed that there should not be an overemphasis on the language issue.\textsuperscript{85}

The issues which grappled Assam following the language problem are numerous. These problems can be said to be offshoot of the language problem. The

\textsuperscript{81} 60\% of the respondents viewed this opinion.
\textsuperscript{83} ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Assam had has witnessed clashes on ethnic and linguistic basis. For example, the Nellie Massacre, violence which has been witnessed in the areas of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts etc.
\textsuperscript{85} This view was expressed by the women members belonging to the Hindu upper caste community, speaking the Assamese language.
migration issue was the pivotal issue for the movement which changed the social, political and economic milieu of the state. The movement was analyzed form many standpoints. Questions of nationalism, leadership, regionalism, and state building in the context of the movement were analysed by the scholars widely. This chapter will only discuss on the representative capacity of the women representatives in the state from the point of participation on two major issues, one being the issue of illegal migrants. Besides the various perspectives of analyzing, gender has been one aspect which had received least attention to study the movement. If we gauge history, women have been active in all social movements, leading and taking along the movement to success. But their contribution has hardly been accepted or their effort examined. As stated by Indra Munshi Saldanha, inspite of women’s active role in the popular struggles there is no guarantee that they were in the leadership position or have “succeeded in achieving equality or freedom from oppression as a result of the struggle.”

Similar situation could be seen during the days after the famous Assam Movement were, women too got wiped out after the goal was achieved. This is the fate of most of women who participate in movements and fail to get what they deserve in lieu of their participation. The formation of the Asom Gana Parishad, the only potent regional party in Assam was brought to power hoping for a change and a better future. This was expected in every sphere of life. So far as women were concerned the expectation was much more than expected. There are reasons for such hope. One primary reason being that, the Assam movement was one of the most prominent movements were women participated in an incredible number.

The Assam Movement being one of the landmark happening had has serious impact in the years to come in the state. It poses to be one issue which needs not only a discussion from various perspectives in the highest decision making body of the state

but that should be one of the starting points for many decisions to be made in the state. And the state legislature can be said to be most appropriate space to carry out such decisions. An attempt in a brief manner has been made in the previous chapter to look into the nature of issues discussed in the House especially by the women representatives. The discussion in chapter would include the role of women representatives from different political parties on the matter. This will enable us to understand the ‘perspective’ through which the question is being asked. This is so because any state from time to time is grappled with a series of events. And some of them lead to massive changes in the future political scenario of the state. The consequences of such events are a package of both the advantages and disadvantages they brought in. And how these events affected the lives of the people as a whole is another important aspect which is hardly discussed. Examining in detail, the debates of the Legislative Assembly during the AGP rule, presents a gloomy picture so far discussion on the language and the migration issue was concerned. The AGP term grappled with heated issues of migration, which was the core issue of the party and also issues like that of language which actually had a strong and a direct link to the migration problem and vice versa. One instance of the first mention of the issue of illegal migrants can be traced during the rule of the Congress under the chief ministership of Golap Borbora, in 1978.\footnote{In the December session of the Assembly, a question was put by Mr. Bishunulal Upadhya, on infiltrators coming in to the state. (05.12.1978)} It is seen from the debates that the issues of these two kinds, were rarely discussed in the floor of the house. The AGP came to power twice. The first time it was from 1985-90 and the second was from 1996-2001. As the composition of the house was mostly by male legislators, the presence of only five women representatives including all the parties seems a weak proposition to challenge the one sided mode of working of the legislature which could not get to know the perspective of these few women. And more so, when a party is in the power, the
women representatives get a very less chance to participate because it only the concerned minister of a department can answer to the queries being asked besides taking part in other activities like the Zero hour, short notice or even during the debate on the governor’s address. To bring aboard in the legislature various problems faced by people, questions, half an hour discussions, calling attention motion are effective measures.\textsuperscript{88} And during the period 1995 till 1990, there were two independent women, and the rest three were from the Congress. So the obvious assumption was that there should have been more questions from the Congress women representatives which were not seen. There was only one woman candidate who managed to become the head of a Ministry during the second term of the party. There were questions by the Congress and the independent women representatives. The issues on which questions were being asked or other issues which were discussed were based on the constituency and on a particular department. As for example if there is a question on electricity or on old age pension it would be to the concerned minister of the concerned department dealing with the issue. The legislator questioning on that particular matter is the representative of that constituency. Therefore the questions asked and issues debated are mostly ‘constituency based.’ The following table shows the issues which were discussed in the house on general issues which concern not a constituency but the people of the state. Here ‘general questions’ would comprise of the issues which concern the state as a whole irrespective of a particular constituency. Discussions on such issues informs the otherwise ‘often uninformed’ representatives of the state of the other issues which can have an influence in their constituency as well. These discussions are carried out in form of answers during the question hour session or when called for attention motion, short notice questions etc. As for example questions of the state excise department, the issue of water testing, early dispersion of post mortem reports in the state etc.

It is surprising to see that there no women representative who participated, debated and argued on the same. And they are seen actively participating mostly on issues concerning their ‘constituency’ and very rarely on women issues. As such the women issues which are very minimally discussed in the house but when discussed women do participate actively and the unity seem to be very evident. This is important because the nature of queries has immense importance so far analyzing the representative effectiveness of the women representatives is concerned. The presence of four women during the two term office of the party brings in debate the discussion of whether a ‘number’ if required, bringing about any changes. The changes though highly questionable, the women representatives from the party were only seen participating in the discussion during the second term when they were in power. The participation of the women representatives from the congress party too seemed evident. The feature to be underlined in relation to the aspect of act of representation is the ‘communication’ between the women representatives of both the party. This also can be ascribed to two factors, one the number of women representatives being less and secondly, the questions during the question hour session being pointed out to the minister of the department concerned leaves little scope for the women representatives from the party to participate. So, what can be seen as participation in the deliberations is from the opposition women representatives or from the independent women representatives. A similar picture can be seen in case of women from the opposition on the matter of illegal migrants, which constituted from the Congress party. The period after the first term in office, the state had witnessed series of violence, killings, clashes, murders etc. which made the state dwell into one of darkest phase. The turmoil’s changed the political scenario of the state but led to a great change in the mindset of the people.

89 This has been expressed by all the respondents that when a woman issue is discussed there is a unity amongst all the women members of the legislature irrespective of party ideology. This has been the case even in the past though there were very few women representative compared to the present percentage in the present legislature.
towards the theory of regionalism. The issues discussed in the legislature were mostly on the infrastructure development and issues related to the constituency of the representatives. This indicated that issues which shook the entire country were not discussed. There were no discussions by the women representatives on these issues. The AGP terms were marked by visible absence of any discussion by the women representatives, on the flight of women who not only lost their homes in the ethnic clashes which took place in Nellie\textsuperscript{90}, the secret killings, the rape and murder of women by the armed forces in the villages when the atrocities of ULFA reached a peak high. And discussions on these issues were necessary because the consequences of those incidents continued to have its effects even in the present times. The conflict area continues to be volatile with conflicts resulting in loss of both material and mankind.

The Indian National Congress (INC) in Assam has been one of the strongest national party which has been fairing creditably well in the electoral politics of the state. From 1975 till 2006, forty two (42) women from the congress could win elections. And these women were also seen holding different portfolios. Compared to any other party, women form the congress party outnumbered other women from other parties. In spite of this comparative edge to numbers, the congress party women representatives failed to take up matters on infiltration, killings, and riots and about the riot victims like a responsible opposition party. It can be argued that the higher number of women actually did not lead to consequent rise in the concern towards women and the issues. The legislative debates in the assembly were specifically on the basis of the problems which were seen in the constituency. The issue of illegal migrants, the language issue, the repealing of the IMDT Act, the clashes resulting because of these problems, not only for the state but also was a national concern. But this issue strangely failed to be prioritized as it should have been in the state assembly itself. Looking at the debates of the

\textsuperscript{90} Nellie is a small town near east of Guwahati, where on 18\textsuperscript{th} February 1983, anti Bangladeshi violence hit killing more than two thousand men, women and children.
assembly and particularly on Assam from the year 1975 till 2006 it was only nineteen times that the issue related to the illegal migrants like identification of the migrants, deportation of illegal migrants and implementation of Assam Accord was discussed. These issues have been combined together to understand the major issue of illegal migrants. What needs to be stressed here is the role of the women representatives. As seen from the table above that the entire issue related with the issue of illegal migrants was discussed for 19 times, especially after the first term of the AGP which was seen a rise in the number of issues discussed in the house. In the first term, the women representatives from the opposition, the Congress and the independent candidates participated in the questions and deliberations which followed. But during the second term, the legislature saw a considerable number of women from both the parties, comparatively from the previous years but none of the women from the opposition party questioned on the issue or discussed in any of the forms of discussions in the house being provided. A few instances could be seen that on issues like the number of Boro women killed by army personnel during the AGP rule\textsuperscript{91} or on compensation to the rape victim’s families,\textsuperscript{92} questioned by the women represented. This shows the nature of issues that women participate in the house. Women’s apparent insensitive in taking up those issues even in the short notice or zero hour failed to justify that women’s presence in the decision making bodies facilitate discussion on women’s issues. If a party wise assessment is done, the percentage of independent women candidates fared better than the representatives from the party. This has also been the case mostly while raising issues of general importance. Therefore the issues of illegal migration, IMDT Act, the killings etc were mostly found to be enquired by the male leaders of the house.

\textsuperscript{91} This issue was raised by a male member of the Congress of the Assembly in 1997.
\textsuperscript{92} This issue was raised by a independent female member of the Assembly in 1998.
TABLE: 3

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<tr>
<th>Issues Raised in the Legislative Assembly on Illegal Migrant Issue/IMDT/Assam Accord</th>
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Therefore, from the above discussion we can infer that the women representatives engaged themselves with issues which were related to their constituency specifically and hence which turned them to ‘local’ leaders of the area they contested from. As assumed that women representatives support women issues and increase in the number of women in the decision making bodies also increase discussion on women’s issue and hence on legislation has come to be questioned and hence not true in case of women representatives of Assam. Women representatives were not seen to support any issue of killings of children and women during the especially regarding the two issues identified, the language and the illegal migrant issue which still continue to be issues of great significance has been discussed by the women representatives in least. The representativeness of the women representatives can be said to be of limited in nature.

The implementation of the Assam Accord, the Anti Foreigner’s Tribunal and deportation of foreigners has been the dominant topic of discussion since decades now. The nature of consequences of these issues touches the lives of people across any identity. And the graveness of these issues could hardly be exaggerated. There are two crucial aspects related to this issue. Firstly, as said the frequency of this topic has been enormously unsatisfactory. Secondly, in the context of the study when we are looking at the role of women in such topics, there has been no women representative who neither questioned on these issues nor was in the power to respond to the queries. It is to be mentioned that it is usually seen that the chief minister retains the powerful portfolios of home, finance and the Assam Accord implementation. So as Assam did not see any
woman Chief Minister except Anuwara Taimur who was from the Congress in the position, no women representation had the opportunity to handle issue related to the foreigner’s issue. Another interesting fact which can be added to this is that, these issues were only discussed in the question hour session and not in other like in calling attention motion or zero hour or could become a topic for no confidence motion. Such a picture only suggests the ‘minimalistic’ role played by the women representatives. There common assumption has always been that women when elected to the state legislature or the parliament take little part in the proceedings and remains a silent spectator.  

93 This idea too seemed to be supported by the women representatives of Assam legislative assembly who unanimously views there though there is a ‘moral’ responsibility of prioritising ‘women issues’ yet being a representation also call in for a wide range of knowledge to deal with the problems not only of the constituency but with issues concerning the entire state. The frequency of appearance of the above mentioned topics reveals that there is ‘monotony’ so far as the nature of issues discussed in the house. When questioned on the reasons why these two issues were not frequently discussed it is revealed by the women representatives that it is the prerogative of the party in the opposition and also to the respective representative to bring out issues which are grave and has immense affects in the long run for the state. Again when argued on the same, the failure of the women representatives to bring about a varied range of issues for discussion has often been said to be because of the ‘backward consciousness’.  

95 But this seem to come true in case of women representatives of Assam, as there were very few instances of women initiating a bill on their own or introducing a matter. Though the percentage of women in the legislature was considerably less it did not however justified their virtual absence from such

94 The aspect of moral responsibility has been expressed by all the respondents.
95 Arunima, op. cit., p.224.
initiatives. It was argued by many feminist that ‘small minority’ is also important for any important act in the legislature. This ‘minority’ is crucial in those countries or states where representation of women has not reached a ‘desirable’ stage.

Besides the role of the above mentioned parties, the role of communist parties in Assam has been very constructive. Being the most powerful leftist party in the state the party has been long playing the role of a constructive opposition for a long time now. They have brought up a number of issues which were about the masses, the downtrodden and the poor. But the struggle for the party for electoral success was very evident with much failure. The party with its very strong ideology has not been doing well so far electoral politics is concerned. Though there have been a number of criticisms on its ‘electoral efficiency’ yet the party continues to uphold their ideology without emphasizing on its electoral success. As much evident from the statistics neither any of the communist parties have been able to win seats and send representatives as they should have despite such a strong ideology. And so are the women representatives from the party. As argued by many feminist that ‘number’ has its own importance, yet there would probably be an importance of quality if there is a ‘number’ question. The party failed to win seats and also in a way promote women. The role of women otherwise too have been extremely limited. It was unaccepted by the women party leaders\textsuperscript{96} that the communist party have failed to have a strong foothold in the state and opined that there are different way of doing politics besides engaging in electoral politics that exist today. Though a number of criticisms have been levelled form time to time that the Assam ‘soil’ is not for communism yet, the party still holds strong that the ideology is applicable for any part of the country what so ever. Though the party leaders seem pessimistic about the present political scenario, yet they strongly opine the need of a change capable to be brought about only by the party. But as the electoral politics

\textsuperscript{96} Excerpt from the interview conducted with the women leaders of both the Communist parties.
dependent on a number of factors, the party with its strong resentment to any unethical means seems difficult for the party to win elections. And the role of women from the party would have been more meaningful for the fact that Assam had a certain ‘kind’ of politics in the form of a long congress rule and also from a regional party like that of AGP. With the expectation that women in politics brings about changes

Under the period the only woman chief minister was Mrs. Anuwara Taimur, from the Indian National Congress who held the position for a very short period. But this position actually did not even empower her to anything substantial for women or to show case the power and capacity the position brings along. Failure in participation of women in these two issues raises the issue of participation of women in such crucial issues. On asked to all the respondents on their virtual absence in participation on such issues, it seems firstly the question is often asked to the minister concerned that is if there is a question on migration or Assam accord, then it is the chief minister or the minister for the implementation of Assam accord will be answering the question asked. And it was seen that none of the women representatives have ever been given such a portfolio or been a Chief Minister after Mrs. Taimur. The example of a having a woman Chief Minister only once indicates to the awful state of affairs so far women in the state assuming position in the higher echelons of power is concerned. More so, this is in fact disturbing because whether it is during the AGP regime or during the Congress, the fact that Assam has been in turmoil since long cannot be ignored and having the dominant idea of women capable of bringing in changes with elements of co-operation, the need could have been seen in the change of leadership in the hands of women. As found in a report, “women experience greater violations being caught between different violators and in view of the fact that in such situations, patriarchal values are strongly
reinforced.\textsuperscript{97} The unrest which has long drawn Assam, effected the women in Assam in the most negative manner and even now women continue to live in this extremely vulnerable situation.\textsuperscript{98} If we carefully examine the questions it can be said that, there have been hardly any questions on the flight of women after the conflict in areas where ethnic population are concentrated.

Thus from the above discussion what can be inferred is the token participation of women in the two mentioned issues of language as well as illegal migrant issue. The women members under the period of study failed to either initiate or even take part when the issues were being discussed in a substantial manner. This is more evident in case of women members of the Indian National Congress and the Asom Gana Parishad. Rather the issues, though fewer in number were discussed by the Independent women members. This strongly indicates the kind of issues that the independent women candidates participate in.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., p.10.