INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the study of what and who constitutes the ‘public space’ has come to assume immense importance. The concepts of public space and public sphere are closely related and are rooted in the ancient Greek distinction of public and private and developed in the early modern Europe through changing ideas of citizenship, civil society, and republicanism. In the wake of industrialization and modernization, there emerged new ideas and thoughts. This led to rise of open and free discussion among citizens. Discussions and deliberations took place in places like the clubs, workplaces, homes, governmental settings, streets, etc. These ‘public spaces’ were accessible to all. Citizens with no private relations came together and engaged themselves in social relations. Debates and discussions which took place among them were conceived in terms of exercise of one’s reason and all disputes were to be settled through logical discussion.

The question of accessibility of women to public spaces is a concern to many social and political theorists. Both men and women are positioned differently in the public space. Although the basic ideology of the theory of public sphere is its openness, yet there are various forms of exclusion which are basic to actually existing public in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. For example, women are widely excluded from nineteenth and twentieth century public space. Role of women in discussions and debates, which took place in the public spaces in past was minimal and continues to be so even in the present times. The dichotomy between the public and the private, male and the female, has a spatial dimension in that women are supposed to be associated with particular places that confirm and maintain their subordination. Women remained excluded and the household remained her ‘natural domain’. She hardly ventured out in the public, even to discuss matters concerning her. Women have always been defined by their reproductive capacities in a western society. It is argued that the reduction of women to her biology is at the core of the western liberal ideology. Because of her capacity of reproducing the species and mothering it, has been a reason to relegate her to a realm which is not ‘public’. On the basis of this capacity she has been excluded from other human activities and contained within a sphere defined as female. The feminist analysis clearly accepts the circumscribing of opportunities because of the space being gendered. It is often seen that the private sphere where the women spend most of her time doing chores which needs much efficiency has hardly been recognized as important. And this is only because this work is unwaged and not seen visibly in the
‘public’. Elizabeth C Stanton is of the view that, women should be ready for participation in the public life rather than confining herself in the private duties. A similar idea is also put forward by Janeway and Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, who advises women to go out in public and become role breakers and also help others to break roles. But with the advent of industrialization and modernization women started joining the work force. It is often argued that such a move had considerably blurred the division between the public and the private spheres. The spaces which were traditionally considered to be of the man came to be occupied by women. Women have come to inhabit and colonize public spaces and engaged themselves in taking advantage of the new social and spatial opportunities. Liberal Feminism, one of the widely known forms of feminist thought started focusing on women’s equal rights in the society, breaking down artificial barriers to women’s participation in the public world, beyond the family and the household. Such approaches gave enough impetus to women to fight for their legal and political rights and compete in the public marketplace.

Women are seen to occupy public spaces in pursuit of social, political and legal aims. It is often believed that politics is by definition men’s sphere. But with women entering the field of politics, such an idea seems to be greatly challenged. V. Mohini Giri argues that it is with the onset of democracy that new hopes and challenges aroused motivating women to take active part in politics. According to Betty Friednan, women in order to have equality with her male counterpart, it is important to have political equality. Political equality through representation in formal institutions like the legislature was a major concern of the feminist of the sixties and the seventies. Among the various areas of participation in the public space, one of the most visible is participation in the representative institutions. Arguments on the basis of utility, equal justice and even symbolic, have been put forward to justify women’s representativeness in the legislature. One among them is put forward by Anne Phillips. She says “it is patently and grotesquely unfair for men to monopolize representation.” According to her, a woman’s interest can best be represented by a woman. And for this she must be present in the representative institution. Anne Phillips has called it as ‘politics of presence’ which she has also contrasted with ‘politics of ideas’. By politics of idea she meant that rather than the ‘representative’, what is important is the responsiveness of the representative towards the electorate. Though debatable, it is often seen that in the present times, the idea of presence of women in the representative assemblies is supported more than any of other arguments. The supporters of this idea are of the view
that presence of women representatives will help not ‘only in motivating women to participate in politics’ but would also help them to ‘raise and articulate problems that women encounter in their lives.’ Thus we can assume that an analysis of women’s participation in the legislature will open a window to the understanding of women’s participation generally in a public space.

In the Indian context, traditionally women were seen to make less public appearances. The national struggle for independence gave the Indian women, both from the urban and the rural the platform to actively come out in public and participate in the struggle. During the freedom struggle equal participation of women in public affairs was claimed to be a demonstration of the progressive and moral superiority of all Indians. Direct political participation of women in the national struggle promoted confidence and self reliance and broke down the barriers between the public and the private to a great extent. The Constitution of India through Article 14 guaranteed political equality between men and women. The Constitution through Articles- 15(3), 16, 39(d), 42, 243 D and 243 T(4) provided adequate measures in favour of women. Though provisions were made for political equality and welfare of women, in actual practice the status of women in the field of politics remained stagnant. A committee was appointed in September 1971 to investigate the status of women in India. The report of the committee, ‘Towards Equality’ published in 1974, inferred that true equality was yet to be achieved for the Indian women and efforts should be made towards achieving it. Highlighting the present status of women in India, Madhu Kishwar is of the view that even five decades after independence, interestingly women seems to become marginalized than they were before. In this context she also mentions of the role of the political parties who has not taken enough steps in enrolling women members in large numbers in the party organization.

As participation of women in Indian politics seems minimal, lower rate of representation is a natural corollary. Almost every country of the world has been making efforts to increase the presence of women in the Parliaments as a part of the directive of the Beijing Platform of Action. It is argued that women should have an opportunity to play a role in the public decision making. It is thought that the ‘legislative role’, like all other political roles is characterized to be a ‘masculine’ one. Like all equal opportunity arguments, it is said that talent is not gendered and absence of women from parliamentary positions is the result of direct or indirect discrimination.
proportion to their total strength, whether in the national or in the state legislature. In fact such a situation is argued to be further aggravated by the role of the political parties whose concern towards representation of women can be seen with serious doubts.

The condition of women in Assam, like the women in the rest of the country was almost non progressive in the past. Whether it was during the Ahom monarchy or rule of the British, women had a subordinate position in the society. The natural difference between men and women and the division of spheres on the basis of this difference was accepted. Any attempt to distort this was considered unnatural and ridiculous. Women were hardly seen occupying important positions- social or religious in the society. Female education, even at the end of the 19th century was hardly emphasized. But the freedom struggle of the country gave the Assamese women the maiden opportunity to come out in public and carry out activities on a larger scale. Women of every house in Assam contributed towards the struggle in both direct and indirect manner. This aroused a great sense of political consciousness among the women in Assam during those days. Mass participation of women in the national struggle gave the opportunity of free mixing of women from the different strata of the society. Taking part in such a large magnitude made the Assamese women challenge the social attitude of men towards them. The Assamese society characterized by strong patriarchal element, women taking part in social activities was not well accepted. But the Assamese women continued to be a part of the public life of the state even after the independence. The period after independence, Assamese women came in contact with Western ideas and thoughts which consequently exposed the women, especially the elite women to the liberal world of ideas. In the late seventies, women engaged themselves in various organizations like the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, the Mahila Sangha, and The Nari Mukti Sanstha. These organisations took into account of the fact that there was large scale discrimination against women in every sphere of life and women in Assam need to develop their own separate platform for self development. The issues which were raised by the above mentioned organizations had a social nature. Concern over the political standing of women in Assam was attended much later.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Political presence or empowerment through representation is vital in a liberal democracy because the actions and deliberations of some people or institutions at some place affect the lives of people at other places. Even after the provision of representation
of women in the legislature, state and national, by the Constitution the percentage of representation of women in comparison to their total strength in the electorate is less. The number of women candidates contesting the elections to the state legislature of Assam from 1952 to 1972 was 41, out of which only 24 women candidates won. The mentioned period witnessed the hegemonic power of the Congress, which came to an end in 1977. There was a shift in the power from the Congress to the Janta Dal. Changes soon followed thereafter in every aspect. But so far women’s representation in the state legislature of Assam was concerned the picture continued to look dismal. The election which was held after the change of power, in Assam in the year 1978 had seen only one woman candidate winning out of twenty contestants. From the subsequent elections, till the one held recently in 2006 only forty women could win out of 195 who contested the elections. The statistics also shows that since independence the Congress has been contesting the largest number of seats in the state. From 1977 to 2006 the Congress had won 365 seats out of 854. The data shows that in the mentioned period, out of 42 women contestants only 26 won. Interestingly, these winning women candidates were from the Congress. But it is also important to see whether parties like the Communist parties and AGP, an important regional political party are making headway in placing women candidates in the state legislature? In essence in view of the scanty representation of women in legislature it is necessary to examine the causes behind this problem. In this context it is important to examine whether political parties are influenced by the dominant set of values existing in the society of Assam. Moreover, it is also imperative to look into whether the political parties are hesitant to field women candidates. To sum up, the proposed study intends to look at women’s role in public space in the context of their performance in the Assam Legislative Assembly.

SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

The study of women in ‘public space’ has been of paramount importance in the recent years. It has been one of the important areas of concern for scholars both at the national and international level. For a proper understanding of the same, appropriate comprehension of the private domains of a woman is essential. Quite a number of studies have been carried out giving insights about the public-private world of a woman.

One of the important works in this regard is Public Roots of Private Action by Nancy Burns et al, wherein the authors deal with the nature of the political and the non-
political world of both man and woman. According to them, there is stark inequality between the two sexes in every sphere of life whether the family, or at the work place. And this disparity is evident across class, age, race or sex. The dichotomy between the two spheres of the public and the private has been well brought out in the book *Public Man Private Woman* by Jean Bethke Elshtain. According to Elshtain both the spheres have reciprocal relation on each other. The status of women from the social and the political perspective, both in the ancient thought as well as in the contemporary time has been well portrayed in the book. Similarly, Lydia Morris and E. Stina Lyon in their edited volume, *Gender Relations in Public and Private: New Research Perspective* explore the various aspects of the public and the private world, and goes on to say that both the spheres have a profound influence in shaping each other. Valerie Bryson in *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction* discusses the Marxist, socialist and the radical nature of feminism from its inception to the present times. She also talks on the equal rights of women in the public and the private spheres. Studies on similar idea are put forwards by Janet Siltanen and Michelle Stanworth, Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates, Anne Cranny Francis, Philomena Essed. In the Indian context studies by Aparna Rayaprol Shashi Ratnaker Singh, Bhikhu Parekh contributed to an in depth understanding of what constitutes in these spaces and how the public and the private spaces have undergone changes.

Exhaustive work has been seen on the political role of women and the nature of political orientations women have. Janet A. Flammang, in her book, *Political Women: Current Roles in State and Local Government* studies the activities of women legislators both at the state and the local level in the United States of America. The book also contains articles on the nature of working of the legislators, the various factors which affect their working and also the status of the women legislators in the party organizations. Kira Sanbonmatsu, in his article, *Gender- Related Political Knowledge and the Descriptive Representation of Women* speaks of the general political knowledge of women which is less compared to men. According to the writer it is a fact that women are always underrepresented and increased political awareness and knowledge among women will give an impetus to increased level of representation of women in the decision making bodies.

In the Indian context, literature on women’s social, political and economic status is quite exhaustive. There has been a massive growth of interest on women’s studies in India, especially in the later part of the 19th century. The political role and the status of
women in India in general is explicitly brought out in a number of important works. *Protecting Our Women: Imperatives of Empowerment: The Political Response* by Maya Majumdar is one of them. The book specifically deals with the political status, participation, decision making, and political rights of the woman. *Women in Politics* by S. Pandey, *Women in India* an edited work by Arunima Baruah, *Women Political Elite: Search for Identity* by Sushila Patni, and *Women in Decision Making* by Ranjana Kumari deals with issues ranging from economic and political participation, representation, socio-cultural problems, legal protection to the nature of decision making among women.

Extensive works have been carried out on the study of political and economic empowerment of women. Rajkumar Pruthi et al, in *Indian Women: Present Status and Future Prospects* presents the Indian women through all these ages and tries to understand women through the various social and the cultural web which has a great bearing in the status of women. The book also examines the women of the tribal society and mentions of the various policies and the programmes formulated for the welfare of the women folk. In the book, *Empowerment of Woman and Rural Development* talks of economic empowerment of the village women of Andhra Pradesh through programmes like the self help groups. Sujit Kumar Dutta and Dilip Kumar Ghosh in *Empowering Rural Women* emphasize the importance of political empowerment of women at the grass root level. The authors stress on the growing workforce of women in the villages and the increase in the literacy rates which is one of the major factor for being empowered. Similar idea is also conveyed in *Political Empowerment of Women* by K. C. Vidya. *Issues on Empowerment of Women* by Utpal kumar Dey and Bhola Nath Ghosh studies the political and the economic status, the constraints faced by the women holding office as Legislators and Panchayat members in the states of West Bengal and Kerala. Upasana Mahanta and Samrat Sinha in their article, *The Political Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Critical Assessment of India’s Experiment with Affirmative Action* makes an attempt to explore the effects of the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in the representation of women at the sub-national and the provincial level. And whether increase in the number of women representative will also mean changes in the quality of representation is looked into. After the passing of the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, there is a growing concern over reinforcing the various aspects of the Panchayati Raj System (PRI) in India. And the role of women in the PRI has become for many a dominant area
Factors like education, family, social structure play a decisive role in determining the public role played by a woman. Works like Women in Contemporary Indian Society edited by Ashok Kumar and Women and Politics in India by Bhawana Jharta unveils factors like education and family which has a profound influence in the nature and scope of women’s participation in the field of politics. The importance of these factors can be gauged from the fact that, scholars while studying the political attitude and behavior of a woman office holder also makes an obvious attempt to inspect the socio, economic and the educational profile of the incumbent and the various perspectives associated between family and political participation.

The study of political representation of women in the State and the national legislature of every country has become important. There is considerable difference in the type of representation of women in the developing and the developed countries. This is reflected in the article, Women’s Representation in the National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries by Richard E. Matland. According to Matland, there is a reciprocal relation between development and representation of women. It seems that development also brings in higher levels of representation in a country. In the article, Parliamentary Representation of Women: From Discourse of Justice to Strategies of Accountability by Marian Sawer, a theoretical explanation, on the underrepresentation of women in the Parliament, is focused. Marian attempted to draw examples from Australia for a better understanding of the same. According to Marian, there is evident discrimination against women by the political parties. Further, the article throws light on the problems associated with representation and accountability of women representatives.

Many Indian scholars have taken keen interest in studying women’s participation in politics, both at the higher and the grass root levels. But there are very few works dealing specifically with the aspect of political representation of women in the decision making bodies like the state Legislature. Important in this connection is the book, Political Representation and Empowerment in India: A Million Indira’s Now by Evelin Hust. The book uniquely and elaborately gives a theoretical explanation of the concept of representation. A detail study of the nature of representation of women, through quotas at the grass root level is made. According to Hust, the relation between
empowerment and representation is quite ambiguous. It is debatable that through political empowerment women can be empowered. Aarti Mehta in her book *Progressive Women and Political Identity* gives a critical account of women’s participation and representation in politics. The book also talks of the discrimination on the basis of sex and the practice and the effects of the division of labour.

A vivid description of the socio economic and political role and status of women in the North East is made in the works like *Women in Naga Society* by Lucy Zehol and *Women of Manipur* by G. K Ghosh and Shukla Ghosh. Lucy Zehol in her book talks about the women of the various tribes of the Nagas. She talks about the various social and educational problems faced by them. In the book ‘Women of Manipur’ the role and the status of Manipuri women in different spheres- social, economic and cultural is clearly shown. So far their political role was concerned; besides having a low percentage of participation, the women in Manipur also have a low representation both in the Parliament and the Legislature. In their edited volume, *Women and Changing Power Structure in North East* Ashok Kumar Ray and Rajendra Prasad Athpania give an illustrative account of the space the women have in the socio economic and political institutions, especially of the tribal women in the states of Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. They also talk of the changing power structure in relation to women in these states.

The status and the place of the women in the society of Assam are evaluated by S. L Baruah in her book, *Status of Women in Assam*. The status of the Assamese women in social, cultural, economic and legal setting is depicted. Besides studying the social and the economic milieu of women in Assam, an attempt has also been made to understand the political standing as well. In the book *Status of Women in Assam* by S. L. Baruah, N. L. Dutta in the chapter, *Status of Women since Independence* brought out the political status of women through their participation and representation of women in the State Legislature from the first Assembly elections to 1985. Niru Hazarika’s important work attempts to analyse the aspect of political representation in the state but there has been no attempt to study in depth the factors responsible for the minimal role of the women representatives and its associated implications. Kunja Medhi and Anuradha Dutta in the chapter *Constraints of Women in Political Participation: A Case Study of Assam* goes on to describe the political status of Indian women in the past and the present scenario, featured by constraints, faced by the Assamese women in special. The nature of political participation of women of Assam, in the form of voters, contestants
and returnees is brought out in the chapter *Political Parties and Women: Aspects of the Issue With Reference to the Situation in Assam* by Anuradha Dutta explicitly deals with the nature and the attitude of the political parties both national and regional, towards women’s participation and representation in the field of politics. Aparna Mahanta in her article, *Women’s Movement in Assam and North East India*, speaks about the nature of women’s movement after independence in Assam and the North East. She also makes mention of the various organizations, their concerns and the issues which came up from time to time in Assam as well as other states.

Thus from the above survey of literature it seems that there are considerable works on political participation, social and the economic standing of women in the state of Assam. But there is very negligible work on the aspect of women’s position in a public space, through women’s representation. Thus this study intends to examine the position of women in a public space like the state legislature in Assam.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

Objectives of the study is:

1. To make an attempt to examine the responses of the two national political parties the Congress, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), on the political representation of women candidates in the State Legislative Assembly.
2. To analyze the response of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), on the political representation of women candidates in the Legislative Assembly of Assam.
3. Also to make an attempt to analyze whether the women representatives are being able to make use of their representative power.

**DATA AND METHODOLOGY:**

For the purpose of the study both primary and secondary data were collected. The primary data included the Statistical Report of the Election Commission of India, 1962-2006, Election Manifestos of the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India, the CPI (Marxist) the regional political party, the Assom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Assam Legislative Assembly Debates from 1962-2006. A content analysis of the election manifestos, pamphlets of the political parties under study is done to understand the response of the parties on women representation in the state. For a more detail understanding of the topic, the constitution of the women’s wing of the political
parties under study has been undertaken. Moreover an attempt is also made which is the main thrust of the study to analyse the legislative assembly debates under the period of study to understand what are the issues discussed in the public space, the state legislature of Assam, as well as the participation of women in these issues. Primary data also comprised of the data generated from the interviews conducted through structured interviews of the present women legislative assembly members as well as of the past women members of the legislative assembly of the political parties under study. In addition to these, the study made use of the other secondary sources such as unpublished thesis, newspaper reports, articles, journals. Effort has been made to understand the aspect of women representation in the state legislature by developing structured open ended questionnaires. These questionnaires were administered to the present women members of the Assam Legislative Assembly as well as to the past women members. A different set of questionnaires too has been given out to the independent women members of the state assembly. The number of independent women candidates interviewed was three. Moreover, for a critical analysis of the role of women in the house, in-depth interviews were also undertaken. The number of women interviewed from the Congress under the period of study is 13, while the number of women from the AGP is four. In order to understand the role of the communist parties on women representation, interview was conducted with seven senior women members from the communist parties as there were no women representatives from both the parties under the period of study in the State Assembly. As from the opposition party, 2 women members from the Assembly were interviewed. The data generated from these questionnaires are presented in a tabular form and subjected to qualitative analysis. The findings were compared with the election manifesto of the parties to understand women’s representation in the State Legislative Assembly of Assam.

CHAPTERIZATION: The study has been divided into six following chapters.

CHAPTER-1: Introduction: Public Space and Women.

The chapter has made an attempt of a conceptual understanding of the concept of public space and then making a detail understanding of the same in relation to women. The concept of public space is understood in different manner by different social theorists. Mention can be made of Jurgen Habermas Nancy Fraser, J. Hartley and P. Howell, Craig Calhoun, who have dwell extensively on the concept of public space. It needs to be mentioned here that the concept is a dynamic one and has been subjected to changes. The chapter includes a detail discussion on the various ways in which the concept has been understood, specifically by the feminist scholars. The feminist
scholars like Joan Landes, Geoff Eley and Hannah Arendt, criticized the construction of a masculine ideal of the discourse on public space. The critical point emphasized by these scholars is one that of exclusion of women from the public spaces. These public spaces are argued to be political centres where decisions on public affairs are being made, like the government agencies, parliaments and courts. For a vigilant democracy to be realised, what is required is a public space which produces wise decisions taken by accountable representatives who are organised in political parties. But what seems to be unconvincing to the feminist is the gendered aspect of these spaces which is argued to be primarily concerned with decision making for the welfare of the ‘public’. And what constitutes these decisions and who makes them? These are some of the issues which are looked into in the context of the public space of the Assam Legislative Assembly. Discussion which follows in this chapter is on the utility of the space through the act of political representation by women of the state. Moreover, the chapter also analyses in detail whether the public space is an effective medium for representation women’s issues. Because of dominant idea of women’s interest being ‘private’ a detail understanding of the issues discussed in this public space. Besides, what forms the public and the private is also undertaken. One of the most important observations which can be concluded from the chapter is that the public space of the Assam State Legislative Assembly is a gendered space in terms of ‘number’ and also in terms of ‘presence’.

**CHAPTER II: Representation of Women in the State Legislative Assembly: Role of the Congress**

The chapter begins with a brief understanding of the concept of representation and links with women and their issues. The concept of representation is itself vexed and when it comes to understanding of representation of women it becomes all the more complex. The aspect of women’s representation argued by Virginia Sapiro, was underplayed, citing that it was not because everybody did not want women to be represented but it was rather though that women were already represented. Studies by Anne Phillips Janes Mansbridge, Iris Young, Joni Lovenduski, Anne Phillips, Leslie A Schwindt-Bayer and William Mishler, Zoya Hasan detailed out the different ways in which political representation is understood in the context of women. The chapter attempts to analyse the concept of women’s representation in public spaces like the legislature. The two important perspectives through which political representation of women is seen to be understood by the gender sensitive literature is through its
qualitative (referring to the representation of women’s interest and policy processes and outcomes) and quantitative content of representation (meaning the number of women in elected bodies, political parties and decision making positions). The study draws a broader definition of representation from Hanah Pitkin’s idea of representation which is argued to be a starting point of understanding representation unlike the traditional understanding of representation carried out between the delegate and the trustee. The complexity of arguments on women’s representation also brought about multidimensional nature of women’s representation. The multidimensional concept of women’s representation brings in a number of questions as like what women representatives are to represent? Do women representatives represent ‘women’s issues’ or not? But again there are also discussions on the inconclusiveness of policy preferences between men and women. And if not, what are the reasons for not being able to bring forth in women’s issues in public spaces like the legislature? The chapter attempts to make a detailed understanding of the above mentioned issues in the context of women representatives of the Assam State Legislative Assembly.

In relation to the above issues, another pertinent question is the role of the various agencies which like the political parties in a party based system as like India where they form one of the most important modes of expressing a ‘common concern’. Besides many functions of a political party one of the most important is the recruitment of political leadership, which consist of candidate nomination and electoral mobilization to win elections for their candidates and capturing power. In most legislative systems, political parties are the main vehicle through which candidates are elected. And what these candidates are expected to represent has come to be one of the most crucial question of representation. Do the party play any role in determining what are the women representatives are to represent? As the locale of our study is Assam, the role of the major national political party, the Congress in this aspect of representation is thoroughly analyzed in this chapter. The chapter includes the analysis of the party’s role through its constitution, the constitution of the women’s wings, the Assam Pradesh Mahila Congress Committee and the election manifestos of the elections conducted under the period of study. The examination of these documents reveals that there was an initial lack on the part of the party at incorporating women issues and also taking up steps towards incorporating women in the part, but subsequently, the party has been able to send a few women to the State Legislative Assembly, though the percentage is extremely low. This emphasis came much later when the need of representation of
women in the highest decision making bodies like the state legislature can to assume importance. This can be traced from the year 2001. But what meaning does this increase in number of women in the state assembly hold? Does it mean that the number of women representation increases the chances of women’s issues to be discussed in the legislature, what kind of representation does it form with an increase of women number in the state assembly? Therefore the chapter entails a detail discussion on it by thoroughly investigating the issues discussed by the women representatives in the Assembly. And whether this participation of women in the issues is both in terms of their numerical strength as well as in their marginal involvement in the parliamentary proceedings and deliberations? The chapter analysis the socio economic status of the women representatives. Attempt to find a relation between the factors and the role of the political parties in nominating the women representatives for elections. It was found that the factor of family linkage and occupation precedes, followed by caste and education. Another finding is no co- relation has been seen with the number of women in the Assembly and the support of women’s issues. Even when under the period the number of women was on a rise, there has been no co relative increase in the number of women’s issues.

An attempt is also made to make a brief understanding of the role of women representatives from the opposition in matters related to women’s issues. Thus, it can be seen that the role of the Congress party towards the issue of women’s representation is moving towards a steady graph so far as ‘number’ is concerned. But moving beyond numbers it can be safely concluded that the women’s issues discussed in the house during the Congress regime has been very less and hence the kind of representation has been more of symbolic in nature.

CHAPTER III: Representation of Women in the State Legislative Assembly: Role of the Communist Parties- CPI and CPI (M)

The present chapter explores the role of the communist parties- the CPI and the CPI (M) in giving representation to women in Assam Legislative Assembly. The chapter begins with an analysis of the question of women through the Marxist perspective. The chapter then proceeds with a brief understanding of the history of the communist party in India and in Assam. The role of women in the development of communist ideology in the country is understood and similarly in case of Assam. It is to be noted here that after the split of the communist party in 1964, two parties i.e. the
Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (M) started functioning in separate manner. Though it is also true that in many occasions both the parties come together as the left united front. The election manifestos of both the parties have been undertaken for a detail analysis of the role of the communist party in dealing with the issue of women and political representation in particular. Statistics reveals that the performance of the communist parties has not been satisfactory in the electoral politics and this again seems to have had an effect on women’s representation in the State Assembly. Under the period of study which is from 1975-2006, both the parties could only send 35 members till today as representatives. But none of them were women. But this absence of women representatives from the party during the party’s participation in sharing of power cannot be without reasons. Therefore, the women leaders of the parties were interviewed to gain an insight into this scenario. the question of obstacles to representation is being understood from the point of view of the party’s steps being taken to incorporate women into the party and then giving them higher positions in the party organisation. The total number of women members interviewed from both the parties is seven. These women members are found to be associated with the respective parties for a considerable period now. The interviews indicated a number of important observations. Firstly, the women members denied an ‘explicit’ role of the party leaders in hindering their representation, but rather had pointed out on the ‘lack of confidence’ among women to come forward for contesting elections. Secondly, there was a mixed view on the importance of the electoral success for the parties. Thirdly, on the question of women’s political representation, it was viewed by the women leaders that the party’s failure in elections has put on the back foot the ‘issue of women’s political representation’. Lastly, the absence of women representatives from the party seems to have led to an absence of a Marxist feminist perspective.

Like the other political parties of the state, women from both the communist parties have their independent mass based women’s organisations, the Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti of CPI (M) and Asom Mahila Sangha of CPI which worked across the state for women, especially the women from the marginalized sections of the society. The activities of the women’s wing of both the parties, is also taken into account for a detailed understanding of the relation between the ideology and the implementation so far as women are concerned. The interview with the women members revealed the various activities undertaken by the women members under the banner of the party. It was revealed that the activities undertaken were for the betterment of the working class
women, educating women on their economic rights and creating awareness to fight against all kinds of discrimination on the basis of sex and atrocities inflicted on them. It is seen that extensive activities are carried out by the women’s wing of both the parties, especially in the rural areas of the state. From time to time, both the organisations took out rallies, protests on various issues and held meetings, workshops for the purpose of educating the rural women. The study revealed that both these organisations are organised in an independent manner and hence do not reply on the parent party for any instructions. This is argued by the women leaders to have empowered the organisations to function without hindrances. At the same time, the women members from these organisations belonging to the parties often bring into notice of the party the various issues concerning women crucial for further discussions. This in a way abreast the parties issues concerning women.

Therefore, it is seen that both the communist parties have failed in the supporting women’s representation. The active role of the women members in the women’s organisations can be said to be exemplary. What lacks is the linkage between this active participation of women in the women’s organisations and party activities with their success as representatives.

CHAPTER IV: Representation of Women in the State Legislative Assembly: Role of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)

This chapter includes a detailed understanding of the role of the most important regional political party in Assam, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) towards the issue of women’s representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The chapter begins with a brief discussion at understanding the growth of the regional political parties, in the country and primarily the AGP in Assam. The Assam movement which formed the basis of the formation of the party had the massive support of women across different sections in the state. The chapter attempts to understand the role of the party through the election manifestos of the party, documents and reports and the constitution of the party. Interviews were conducted with four former women representatives of the party. The interviews enabled a proper and an in depth understanding of what actually goes on in the process of representation. Moreover, the study of the legislative debates during the tenure of the party as the ruling party and even when it played the role as the opposition party is looked into to understand the role of these women representatives in supporting women’s issues.
Another aspect which was looked into to analyze the aspect of representation was the role of the women’s wing of the party, the Assam Mahila Parishad in facilitating women’s representation. The constitution of the women’s wing gives us an idea of what the party has sought for the women of the state. On the question of autonomy of the women’s wings, it was found that the organisation has limited power to make ‘final’ decisions on ‘certain issues’.

It was found that the party has shown a static trend at facilitating women’s representation. The rigidity of the party is found to exist when it comes to promoting women for representation. Besides, an extremely circumscribed role of the women representatives is evident in supporting and facilitating women’s discussion on women’s issues and representation has only been symbolic in nature.

CHAPTER V: Role of Women Representatives in the State Legislative Assembly

The chapter undertakes an understanding of the effectiveness of the representative capacity through their participation in the deliberations in the two major issues, having a profound influence in the social, political and economic milieu of the state, the issues of language and the illegal migrants. As often that women take interest ‘instinctively’ on special needs or interests of women, but it can also be seen that this attitude might work against women getting into representation. The institutions which are dominated by men are often argued to institutionalize male legislating style which again influences legislator’s support of issues. Such a practice facilitates attempts to continuously establish the fact that women can only get their bills passed if they legislate like men. This is argued by the feminists to be contained through strategic acts for a deeping democracy to exist. Support for women policies by women in decision making bodies like the legislature against the argument that there are hardly any differences between men and women on women issues has been a major area of debate for feminist who has been working on the effects of women’s representation in so far as women question is concerned. While there are studies, one among them stating that there are certain women’s issues where men’s cooperation is necessary to solve the problems related to it. A general ‘grumble’ is found among the non supporters of women’s representation is that women getting into the space only mean doing ‘women’s talk’. This has been greatly challenged by feminists who promote women’s politics which encompasses doing politics in the interest of women. Therefore whether women representatives have carried out similar activity in regard to the two issues is
attempted for study. These two issues though cannot be understood as so called women’s issues, yet taking up non- women issues enables a broader understanding of the political representation by women in the state assembly.

The political scenario of Assam since independence has been characterized by some landmark happenings which had have contributed to the change of the entire socio-political future of the state since then. Of the major issues that informed the culture and politics of post-independence Assam, none perhaps acquired the kind of centrality that language did. The intertwining of language and immigration have been immensely crucial issues in the politics of Assam for almost two centuries now. As like any other movement, even the language problem saw the dynamic participation of the civil society comprising of students, intellectuals and even the ‘women’. 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. Many of them were even killed. The first martyr of the andolan, Kamala Bhattacharjee was a woman. This therefore shows enough that women as like any other movement in the country participated to ‘protect’ their language. Besides the major issue of language which had far reaching implications in the state and continues to have even today, there were additional issues which could be seen related to this issue, like the issues of medium of instructions in the educational institutions, office of the state government etc. These issues were seen to be a part of discussions in the legislative assembly, but certainly to a limited extent. More limited was the role of women representatives then and even later who were seen seemingly pulled back in discussing such issues. The was no participation seen from the women representatives on the issue from 1962-1972. While in the following years, the issue of language was discussed for few times and almost no women took part in such discussion. This shows clearly the acute non participatory role of women representatives on issue of language and or on its related subject.

Similar picture is seen on the participation of women representatives in case of the very critical issue of illegal migrants in the state. The illegal migrants issue was the pivotal issue for the Assam Movement which had seen extraordinary participation of women in the state. The issues of illegal migrants, the IMDT Act, implementation of Assam Accord, clashes based on ethnic and linguistic identity etc. were what the state faced leading to turmoil one after another leading to uncertainties. And it needs to be mentioned that women and children were the most affected of all. These issues and
similar ones continue to form the pivotal topics of the state which remains still unsolved, besides getting aggravated taking different forms in varying degrees. When so many women and children as been affected, what role has the women representatives played in dealing with these issues, starting with the raising of these and related issues? The chapter looks into the women’s participation on these two issues.

The study found that the participation of women in the language issue has been extremely less, while the participation of the women representatives on the issue of illegal migrants and the consequences of the problem have been taken up by women in few instances, more precisely when then is a discussion rather than raising the issue specifically by the representative herself. This limited role of the women representatives underplayed the serious consequences which the problem brought about in so far women are concerned as like the atrocities meted out to women in the form of rapes, murders and molestation to name a few.

CHAPTER VI: Conclusion

This chapter carries the conclusion. The following are some of the major findings of the study:

1. Through the theoretical study of the concept of public space, we can see that the space like the Assam legislature is one of the most important public spaces so far as women’s symbolic representation is concerned. But it does not form the important space for or descriptive or substantive form of representation. It is again found that this public space forms an inappropriate space for discussion of women’s issues. The issues discussed and deliberated are issues broad in nature, which are not ‘women issues’ in particular but issues of a particular constituency/area. This therefore shows that the State Legislative Assembly as the public space is inadequate for women’s representation.

2. It was again found that the role of the political parties in totality are ‘rigid’ and the women representatives getting into the seats of power is primarily ascribes to their own efforts, at least at the initial stage of selection of candidate by a political party. It has been found that irrespective of any party, the gate keeping role in case of women representation is firm and hence put women candidates into fetters towards representation in such spaces.

3. Another significant finding has been the role of the socio-economic factors of the women representatives which is found to facilitate their selection
for running elections, by the political parties. The factors like the prior occupation of the women representatives which is mostly found to be from the social service followed by the factor of caste is found to have a profound influence. This finding again suggest that the women representatives’ prior engagement with the public activities. Majority of women have been found to have been carried out some or other forms of activities which dealt with women. But again, this experience did not get translated into action through support of various issues. The percentage of women having a priori knowledge on the issues of the society through their social service is seen to have given them ‘confidence’ and the ‘motivation’ to be in politics.

4. The role of the independent women candidates who has outshined women from the political parties is noteworthy here. This can be said to be a significant finding of the study which goes against the prevailing central idea of the over emphasized role of the need of the political parties at being the platform or the driving force to bring into fore issues to be resolved in a party based electoral politics. The significant participation of the independent women candidates has brought in the question the relation between women political representation and the political parties. Though the number of independent women candidates under the period of study has been extremely less, yet the participation of these women candidates brought in again the much debated issue of number versus interest to be represented. The independent candidates though is found to be engaged actively in the discussion of the general issues What can be drawn from the interview with the independent candidates is the fact that there is no binding on these candidates of the party which even evades the ‘problem’ of toeing the party lines when in confrontation with the party on certain issues. The major accusation of the feminist has been the rigid role of the political as gatekeepers and the basis of the rationale of playing down the role of the women representatives in the act of sharing power through the distribution of ‘weaker’ portfolios. This is now challenged by the overriding role of the independent women candidates to a considerable extent. The success of the independent women candidates can lead to a deeper analysis of the reasons for better performance of the independent women candidates than their counterparts who were from the political parties.

5. While discussing Assembly activity of the women representatives, it was seen that there is a unity among the women representatives across parties
when there is a woman issue being discussed. Though it did not get materialised in form of ‘real legislation’ yet from the point of a collective voice, it has symbolic implications. This understanding is required more for women issue in the background of the fact that the legislature which is still considered a bastion of male, women’s unity can go a long way in burgeoning women’s issues and also promoting a consensus on issues concerning women, going beyond party lines. The study revealed that though few in incidence, yet whenever there was a call for a united effort by the women representatives there was a united effort on the part of all the women representatives in the house. This might challenge the dominant role of the party in ‘compelling’ its women members more than often to follow the party lines even on women’s issues.

6. Another very significant finding has been the space being a ‘unifying’ platform for the women members. Though it has been found that the issues of women have been very few, yet the inter relation between the women members across parties is found while the business of the House is being conducted. This inter relationship is characterised by an attitude of co operation between the women members. It has also been found that the increase in the number of women members in the House facilitates a ‘comfortable’ environment for women members to carry out their business.