CHAPTER-VII

ISSUES OF WOMEN

Issues are the various subjects raised by the legislators on the floor of the Legislature. These are the agenda for their active participation in the political system. The legislators are the representatives of the people. As leaders they are to handle certain problems of their respective areas. These problems are raised on the floor of the House in the form of issues. There are two types of issues—General issues and Women issues. General issues are related to general problems of the area like—water supply, health and hygiene etc. The issues, which are related to women, are called women issues.

An analysis of the woman legislator’s role in raising various issues in the Legislature reveals that whether they raised issues specific to the women problems only or also other issues related to the problems of their constituencies and the State. The level of their participation in the Parliamentary and the Assembly sessions has been consulted thoroughly from the documented proceedings of the Legislature. An attempt has also been made to find out how many woman legislators have actively participated in the Assembly and Parliamentary debates and the issues raised by them.

*Issues of Women raised by Women on the Floor of the Lok Sabha*

A thorough study on the woman legislator’s participation in the documented proceedings of the Legislature reveals their role in raising women issues in the Parliament—

*Bonily Khongmen*:—Bonily Khongmen was first elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1946 and was appointed as Deputy Speaker in the Assembly. She was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1952 as Congress candidate. On the floor of the Lok Sabha, she did welcome the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill on behalf of the women of India. She championed the cause when she stated, “Sir on behalf of the women in India, I welcome the Bill, which has been brought by the Honourable Law Minister. For this Bill, when it becomes law, will give protection and right, which have so long been denied, to the women of the country. Coming from a community,
which gives equal rights and privileges to women, I do whole-heartedly support this kind of legislation. I was rather taken aback when I heard the Honourable Law Minister saying that the time is not yet ripe for such legislation. I cannot speak for Ajmer. But so far as my State, that is Assam is concerned I may tell the Honourable Minister that the number of letters that have received from the Mahila Samiti, the biggest Women’s Organization in the State of Assam, as well as from individuals will go to show that the real opinion is otherwise. And I am sure my friends are from Assam will argue that the opinion of the majority of the people of Assam is in favour of the Bill."

Sardar Hukum Singh: Does Mr. Choudhuri agree with that?

B. Khongmen: I may remind the House that he who championed the cause of the air hostesses and very violently fought against the Finance Minister. When he proposed to levy taxes on lipstick and so on, will surely take up the cause of the women of Assam by supporting this Bill wholeheartedly. I also find from the opinion expressed by various public bodies, officers and eminent persons of Assam who were consulted on the Hindu Code Bill as far back as 1945 and 1947 that a majority of them are in favour of it.

Sri R.K. Choudhuri (Guwahati) In favour of divorce?

Bonily Khongmen:—In favour of Hindu Code, "I therefore, say that the public of Assam, especially, the women are anxious to see that social reform is introduced in the country as speedily as possible."

Bonily Khongmen criticized the National Volunteer Force Bill as this Bill excluded women from joining the National Volunteer Force and demanded for the inclusion of women in the National Volunteer Force. She strongly condemned Government when it wanted to exclude women from joining the Indian Administrative Service. Her statement in the Parliament on the issue has been quoted below as a testimony of her concern for the gradual progress of the Indian women.

Bonily Khongmen: National Volunteer Force Bill: 'I welcome this Bill', which has brought forward by the Honourable Minister of Defence 'my only complain against Bill is that a very important section of our population has been denied the benefits that this scheme is going to give. I always seem to disagree with the Honourable

Minister as on one point, and this is his attitude towards women. I had the unpleasant occasion to disagree with him two years ago when he wanted to exclude women from joining Indian Administrative Service. Today, again I regret to say that he has completely excluded women from joining the National Volunteer Force. The documented proceedings of the Lok Sabha reveals that she fought for the cause of women”.

Rani Manjula Devi: —Rani Manjula Devi was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1957 from the Goalpara constituency as Congress nominee. She was one of the pioneers of women’s movement in Goalpara District. She as legislator in the Lok Sabha and in the Assam Legislative Assembly always raised her voice for the upliftment of women. She proposed for women education. She was connected with many women organizations of not only Assam but throughout the country. Taking part in the Dowry Prohibition Bill, she raised her voice on Dowry Prohibition, which is one of the main problem faced by Indian women 2. She always fought against the injustices done to women. She questioned on immoral traffic in women and girls. She demanded compensation to the widow of Shankar Pillai. On the floor of the Lok Sabha, Rani Manjula Devi with Renu Chakraborty, Satyabhama Devi and Laxmi Bai questioned whether the attention of the Government has been drawn to the report of the Committee appointed by the Punjab Government in which recommendations has been made to abolish the right of daughter to inherit the agricultural property of her father as granted under the Hindu Succession Act and they demanded the Government to take steps to safeguard the rights of the daughter as ensured by the Hindu Succession Act. She fought for the cause of women throughout her life.

Renuka Debi Barkataky: —Renuka Devi Barkataky was elected to the Lok Sabha two times in 1962 and in 1977. She also became the member of State Legislative Assembly. She became the Central Minister. She was the Secretary of Women Department, Assam Pradesh Congress, 1955 and worked as in charge of Women and Children’s Wing. She raised a few women issues such as basic education to adult women, completion of projects undertaken during International women year, implementation of equal wages for equal work to men and women, Girls Polytechnique school in Assam etc. She as Minister dealt with the question of National Plan of

Action for women. Renuka Debi Barkatay though raised a few issues on the floor of the Assam Legislative Assembly and in the Lok Sabha but she did not give much stress to the women issues.

Mofida Ahmed: Mofida Ahmed was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 1957 from the Jorhat constituency as Congress nominee. She was associated with some women organizations of Assam. She was the Assistant Secretary, Tezpur District Mahila Samiti (October 1951 to January 1953), maternity welfare centre, rescue of fallen women. She also proposed on the floor of the Lok Sabha for the provision of women pilot. Though she was associated with some women organizations but she was silent about the women related matters.

Jyotsna Chanda: Jyotsna Chanda was first elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1957 and elected to the Lok Sabha for three consecutive terms. On the floor of the Assembly, she asked about the Girl’s Higher Secondary schools, disparity in payment of salaries between male and female teacher. She did not raise women related matters in the Lok Sabha. She was from the Barak Valley and was more interested for the people of her region. She tried to solve the local problems. She paid more attention to the people of her area and had no time to speak for the women of Assam.

Rashida Haque Choudhury: Rashida Haque was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1977. She was the member of the Gramin Mahila Samiti. As legislator she did not play active role in the Lok Sabha. After studying the documented proceedings of the Parliament, it is found that neither she did raise any general issue nor women related issues.

Ranee Narah: Ranee Narah was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1998 and in 1999. On the floor of the Lok Sabha, she asked question relating the literacy among the female particularly belonging to SC/ST is very low in most of the States particularly in the North East. It is seen from the thorough consultation of the Parliamentary proceedings that she raised the issues mainly related to her constituency and she was silent about the women as a whole.

Bijoya Chakraborty: Bijoya Chakraborty was first elected to the Rajya Sabha.

and then to the Lok Sabha. She became the Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation. As member of the Rajya Sabha she raised various issues of National and International importance. But she was silent about the women section of the society.

**Issues of women raised by women in the Rajya Sabha**

The woman members represented to the Rajya Sabha from Assam are—Puspalata Das, Bedavati Buragohain, Usha Barthakur, Bijoya Chakraborty, Basanti Sarma, Jaysree Goswami Mahanta, and Syeda Anowara Taimur

An analysis of the woman members in raising women issues are—

*Puspalata Das*: - Puspalata Das was the freedom fighter and social worker elected to the Rajya Sabha for two consecutive terms. She also became the member of the Assam Legislative Assembly. She welcome the Dowry Prohibition Bill 1959 and in the Parliament she said “I welcome this Bill; and you know sir, that I came from a State where we do not suffer from the dowry system still I want to support this Bill and to show to the House that the whole of India, all the States, want this evil to be removed” . . . ‘I want that this word dowry if possible must be removed because once we ‘say dowry given and taken, then it comes under the law why cannot this word ‘dowry’ be removed’? Let not the word dowry be at all in this Bill. I feel in that way because I am coming from a State where some other system is prevalent.”

She also took an active part in the Special Marriage Bill, 1952 and expressed her view in favour of women. During the language disturbance in Assam in 1960, members of the Parliament condemned the case of molestation in Assam. Puspalata Das, with Abha Maity and Geeta Mukherjee and other members of the House came to Assam and enquired the matter. After the enquiry she was able to prove the truth successfully in the House. Puspalata Das was one of the pioneers of women movement. She fought throughout her life for the cause of women.

*Bedavati Buragohain*: - She was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1960. In the Rajya Sabha. She took part in the sessions of the Rajya Sabha. As woman member, she did not raise any issue related to women and most of the time remained silent.

*Basanti Sarma*: - Basanti Sarma was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1991 as a

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Congress candidate. She raised some general issues but she never raised any women issue in the Rajya Sabha. She became the Chairperson of the State Women Commission. So, she as member did not raise any women related issues on the floor of the Rajya Sabha.

_Joysree Goswami Mahanta:_ Jaysee Goswami Mahanta was elected to the Rajya Sabha and remained for two years as member of the Rajya Sabha. On the floor of the Rajya Sabha, she raised many issues relating to National and International matters but never raised women issues.

_Syeda Anowara Taimur:_ Syeda Anowara Taimur was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for fourth times. She became the member of the Rajya Sabha in 2003. She also became the Chief Minister of Assam for six months. So, she had a long political career. On the floor of the Assembly, she asked questions relating to the steps for helpless women particularly for the tribal women. She raised her voice about the steps taken for the welfare of the women of backward areas. But her voice was not strong in favour of women. She did not raise her voice for the cause of women of Assam.

**Issues of Women raised in the Assam Legislative Assembly**

An analysis of the woman legislators of Assam on the floor of the Assembly is essential to know their role in dealing with the women issues. A thorough study of the documented proceedings of the Assembly reveals their role in raising the women issue in the Assembly. Women represented in the Assembly are:

_Usha Barthakur_ - Usha Barthakur was the first lady elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1952 and also became the member of the Rajya Sabha in 1967. She was one of the pioneers of the women development. She proposed to give preference to the desirable girl students in awarding stipends for training facilities in various subjects abroad. She also proposed to start scheme for the upliftment of the rural women. She demanded to increase the number of woman officers and equal facilities to be provided for both the male and female officers. She was the founder of Nowgong District Mahila Samiti. In most of the time she was busy with the women problems.

Kamal Kumari Barua: - Kamal Kumari Barua was elected from Katonigaon constituency for two consecutive terms. She was associated with many women organizations of Assam. She has become the President of the Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti. As legislator, she raised such issues like girls up to Higher Secondary level should get free education facilities, facilities to women prisoners in the jail. She also raised question like that girl students are not allowed to some of the trades of Engineering and sufficient arrangements should be provided for the girls and enough facilities for women education. 6 As legislator she handled many problems but neglected women related matters.

Padma Kumari Gohain: Padma Kumari Gohain was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for three consecutive terms. She also became the Minister of State for Social Welfare. After studying the Assembly debates it is found that she did not play an active role as legislator and as Minister on the floor of the Assembly, she did not raise any women issue.

Lily Sengupta:- Lily Sengupta was associated with many women organizations of Assam. She was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for three consecutive terms. As legislator she raised many issues relating to women. She demanded grant for women education, seating arrangements in the mar-boats for lady passengers, improvement of cottage industry to make the women economically strong. On the floor of the Assembly she asked about rehabilitation of the destitute women in Assam, non-casting of vote by the female Tea Garden labourers. 7 The proceedings of the Assam Legislative Assembly reveals that she was an active member who played her vivid role in handling so many issues relating to women.

Begum Afia Ahmed: —Begum Afia Ahmed was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1962. As legislator she did not play an important role in the Assembly and did not raise any women issue. In 1965, it may be mentioned in this regard, Mal Chandra Pegu, a member of Assam Legislative Assembly asked to Chief Minister, Sri Bimola Prasad Chaliha, regarding the arrest of women and children of Missing village under Golaghat Subdivision. He raised the issue on the floor of the Assembly, he drew the attention of the Assembly how all women including pregnant

6. Ibid, 17th March, 1959
wives and small children belonging to the Chengeliati Mishing village of Ahotguri Mouza, Majuli in Golaghat Subdivision had been brought under arrest in connection with a police case on December 5th, 1965 to Golaghat Court by Dergaon police. At that time there were four women in the Assembly but they did not speak a single word in this matter. There was an adjournment motion for alleged lathi charge on a number of women by the police of the Dhakuakhana police station on February 13th, 1966. During this time also woman representatives in the Assembly did not condemn against these injustices to women. She was not an active lady representative and remained silent on the floor of the Assembly.

Pranita Talukdar:—Pranita Talukdar was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for two consecutive terms. On the floor of the Assembly she raised question relating to the number of educated unemployed women of Assam. She asked question relating the training of poor women and after training how they will be employed. She paid more attention to the problems of her constituency. She did not raise her voice in favour of the women of Assam.

Anandi Bala Rava:—Anandi Bala Rava was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1972. On the floor of the Assembly, she raised a few issues. She asked the Deputy Speaker, ‘As women permit us to speak’.9 She demanded for the maternity and child welfare centres. She raised her voice about the rehabilitation centres, the number of helpless women in the State. She also asked about the re-settlement of widows through cottage industries. As legislator she asked many questions relating to the various problems of the State and about her constituency. She raised a few women issues that are not countable. She also did not give too much importance to the women.

Satyabati Goswami:—Satyabati Goswami was associated with many women organizations. She was elected to the Assembly in 1972. She did not raise many issues on the floor of the Assembly. She demanded that there is no developmental project for the welfare of women and there is no project for the helpless widows of the State. She also said 50% of our populations are women, so there must be welfare project for women. As legislator, she did not raise many issues but a few of them are

8. Ibid, 24th September 1974
women issues. She said 50% of the population being women their development couldn’t be neglected.

_Rebati Das_: —Rebati was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1972. She asked about the member of the Social Welfare Board is not taken from the village women having the required qualifications. She also asked about the developmental project of women, number of educated unemployed women etc. On the floor of the Assembly, she remained silent in most of the times. As woman legislator she was not active about the women issues.

_Tarulata Bora_: - Tarulata Bora was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1972. On the floor of the Assembly, she demanded to grant maternity leave to the Harijan women, number of women police and women home guard. She also suggested to increase the number of women police, provision for helpless widows, project for the training of various kind of farms to the women, training of village women, training centres for poor women etc. She also said that women should be properly trained about animal husbandry. Tarulata Bora raised her voice in favour of the women of Assam.

_Mridula Saharia_: - Mridula Saharia was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1983. She raised some issues on the floor of the Assembly but was completely silent about the women related issues. She became the Chairperson of the Women Commission of Assam.

_Jyotsna Sonowal_: - Jyotsna Sonowal was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1985. On the floor of the Assembly, she raised some issues related to her constituency. She was busy with the problems of her area and had no time for the women of Assam.

_Swarna Prova Mahanta_: - Mahanta was first elected to this august body in 1972. She became a Minister in the Sarat Sinha Ministry. It has been found that she did not speak a single word neither for the general people nor for the women of Assam.

_Amiya Gogoi_: - Amiya Gogoi was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1991 and in 1996. In 1991, she became the Minister of State for Handloom and Textile. As legislator, she raised some issues related to her constituency. She did not speak for the women of Assam.

_10. Debates of the Assam Legislative Assembly, 23rd March, 1977._
**Kumari Rabidas** :- Kumari Rabidas was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1985. On the floor of the Assembly, she raised the issues related to her constituency. She was not active. She did not speak for the women of Assam.

**Rekha Rani Das Boro**:- Rekha Rani Das Boro was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1985 and in 1996. In both the terms, she was appointed as Minister of State Social Welfare Sericulture and Weaving. She was the Minister of Women and Social Welfare and handled the problems relating to Mahila Samiti, steps taken for the development of women. She dealt with the matters relating that widows and helpless women are to be employed for the post of Anganabadi workers. She was the Minister and had no chance to raise any issue either general or women issues in the Legislature. She as Women Welfare Minister has taken some steps for the welfare of the women of Assam.

**Pramila Brahma**; —Pramila Brahma was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for three consecutive terms from 1991 to 2001. On the floor of the Assembly, she raised her voice about the various problems of her constituency mainly about the B.T.C area. She asked about the provision of girls’ college in the Kokrajhar area. She also raised her voice about the number of girls kidnapping cases, the post of Deputy Speaker to a woman etc. She also raised question relating to the compensation paid to the women raped by the B.S.F jawans. So, though she was most active lady legislator but she did not give much importance to the women issues.

**Rupam Kurmi**; —Rupam Kurmi was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for three consecutive terms and became the Minister. She was inspired to work for the helpless women and children. She raised many issues on the floor of the Assembly but a few of them are women issues. She asked for the appointment of educated men and women of Mariani. On the floor of the Assembly, she raised her voice to provide facility to the Tea-Garden matriculate and under-matric women to train in nursing courses and after training they should be employed in the Tea-Garden hospital, to provide pension to the widows of the Tea-Garden women, to utilize the funds properly for the welfare of the widows. She was the most active woman legislator of Assam. She always raised her voice against any kind of social injustices. As woman legislator she raised some issues related to the women of the Tea Tribe community.

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13. Ibid, 16th March, 1995
Renupama Rajkhowa: Renupama Rajkhowa was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for two consecutive terms. As legislator, she raised some issues related to various matters. On the floor of the Assembly, she asked question relating to the resettlement of the raped women, multi-purpose women Cooperative Society, torture of a girl in the Jorhat Engineering College and the authority could not provide safeguard to her. She said that women should be provided equal facilities like men, visited the jails and reported that the condition of women prisoners are very deteriorating mainly in the Guwahati jail, rehabilitation of raped women, number of rape cases in Assam etc. On the floor of the Assembly, she protested against the ill behaviour of a male member of the Assembly. She also criticized the Government in the address of the Governor, there was no indication of women security, special steps should be taken for the education and health of women and there should be the provision of self-employment to the women. As legislator she raised her voice in favour of women of Assam.

Sushila Hazarika: Sushila Hazarika was first elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1996. On the floor of the Assembly, she asked about the women and child welfare project. So, she worked for the development of village women through block level. As woman legislator, she did not raise any women issue in the Assembly. She raised some issues related to her community (SC) and had no time for the women of Assam.

Alaka Desai Sarma: Alaka Desai Sarma was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in the bye-election of 2000. She remained as member of the Assembly for nine months. So, on the floor of the Assembly, she did neither raise general nor women related issues.

Komoli Basumatary: Komoli Basumatary was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 2001 So, as woman legislator, she raised a few issues related to her constituency. Most of the time, she remained silent in the Assembly. She never spoke about the women of Assam.

Jibontara Ghatoar: Jibontara Ghatoar was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in the bye-election in 2004. So, as legislator, she did not play any active

14. Ibid, 7th April, 1993
role. She remained silent in the Assembly. She neither raise any general issues nor women issues in the Legislature.

**Jonjonali Barua**: Jonjonali Barua was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 2001. As legislator, she did not play any active role in the Legislature. She did not speak for the women of Assam.

**Hosenara Islam**: —Hosenara Islam was elected to the Assembly in 2001. On the floor of the Assembly, she remained silent and did not speak in the Assembly.

**Sarifa Begum**: —Sarifa Begum was elected to the Assembly in 2001. As legislator she was not active and remained silent in the Legislature. She did not raise either general or women related issues on the floor of the Assembly.

**Uttara Kalita**: —Uttara kalita was elected to the Assembly in 2001 On the floor of the Assembly, she remained silent. She was not active. She speaks only a few times and that is also about her constituency problems. She did not speak a single word about the women of Assam.

**Hemoprava Saikia**: —Dr. Hemoprova Saikia was elected to the Assembly in 1996 and in 2001 for two consecutive terms. She became the Minister in the Tarun Gogoi Ministry. She asked about the Kamrupa Girl’s Hostel at New Delhi. As legislator she raised some issues relating to her constituency but did not speak for the women of Assam. As Minister of women related department, she has adopted a few steps for the women of Assam.

**Pranati Phukan**: —Pranati Phukan was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly for two consecutive terms. As legislator she raised the issues relating to her constituency and also the issues relating to the greater interest of the society. She raised women issues like- the number of rape cases in G.M.C, provision of girl’s hostel, etc. On the floor of the Assembly, she asked about 50% post reservation for women in the primary and high schools. So, as legislator she did not give too much importance on the women of Assam.

**Ajanta Neog**: —Ajanta Neog was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 2001. As legislator, she raised some issues but she did not speak a single word about the women of Assam.

17. Debates of the Assam Legislative Assembly, 11th December, 1996
An analysis of the role performances of the woman legislators reveals that whether woman legislators raised issues specific to the problems of their own constituency or general issues related to the State as a whole. The level of their participation in the Parliament and in the Assembly debates has been cursorily examined. An attempt has been made to find out how many woman legislators have been actively participating in the Assembly proceedings and the kind of issues raised by them.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the subject of women's welfare as such does not figure significantly during the Assembly and Parliamentary sessions. There are some assumptions for sidetracking the subject. Majority of the women felt that women issues are ignored because of a meager representation of women in the House in all levels of political forums. Some felt that women issues are not getting importance due to the lack of women's initiative. Another few felt that there was no need of discussing the issue as a separate subject because it was covered in general discussion e.g. Health, Family Planning, and Education, are closely connected with women. So, women's interests are not adequately represented in the political forums partly because of men's indifference and women's as well.

After consulting the woman representative's role in raising women's issues it reveals that it is very clear in the Assembly and Parliamentary proceedings and deliberations. This is despite the fact that their numerical strength is low in comparison to male members. A preliminary analysis of the available documented proceedings of the Assembly and the Parliament clearly indicate that though woman legislators have been participating in the debates on various Bills and raising questions related to the local problems of their constituencies but this participation has been very low. Most of the woman legislators of Assam, though they were very active and participated in the debates and discussions of the Legislature but they were misér to deal with the women issues. Only a minimum number of woman leaders handled women issues. The male legislators in the Assam Legislative Assembly raised most of the women issues. The legislative history of Assam reveals that the woman legislators of senior age were more conscious about the women issues. They fought for the women's education and for other problems. But the present woman leaders of young age are overlooking the women issues. They are more busy with their constituency problems.
Some woman leaders of senior age were more active. They protested against any kind of social injustice inside or outside the State. Some of the woman members of the Assam Assembly remained silent on the floor of the Assembly. The 12th Assembly represents 10 woman members and 50% of them did not ask any question on the floor of the Assembly. So, woman leaders are not conscious about the women related problems.