The present study is an attempt to assess the role of woman legislators of Assam in the Parliament and in the State Legislative Assembly focusing on certain areas—the social background of the woman legislators, the ways and means they have adopted to get their position, their role performances, the policies they have adopted, the issues they raised in the Assembly and in the Parliament and their social and cultural barriers to participate in politics. It is a study of 49 years of woman legislators covering First election in 1952 to 2001 in case of Assam Legislative Assembly and 1952 to 1999 in case of Parliament. The study is mainly related to the participation of women in the State politics and how their involvement has improved the conditions of women. The various legislative steps and the provisions related to women in the Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy have also been analysed the subordinate status of women in the family, education, customs and traditions, which were responsible for the low status of women are also highlighted. The role of the women in the Assam Legislative Assembly and in the Lok Sabha and in the Rajya Sabha in dealing with the women's interest has also discussed.

The political participation of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly have to be dealt with a few points like—the nature and number of women participants in the political system from the First election in 1952, their participation in the Ministerial births, their role in solving women problems, their status and background of political backing which helped women’s political participation in the freedom struggle, various women movements and agitations, trade union movements, in the elected bodies like Parliament, State Legislature and Local Government institutions, political parties, pressure groups, interest groups and lobby groups etc. But it was quite impossible to cover all the areas where women’s entrance is visible and the present study has attempted to focus only on the woman legislators of Assam representing in the Parliament and in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The data and information regarding woman legislators are rare and there is no systematic study available.

The study is mainly based on the official documents of the Assam Legislative Assembly and the Parliament, interview with some ex woman legislators and the woman members of the 12th Assembly, their personal statements and experiences,
proceedings of the Assam Legislative Assembly and the Parliament, reports of the
different Committees, election reports, newspapers, journals and other Government
documents. However, there was the non-availability of women’s interference in the
Government records. To find out women’s role in dealing with the women problems
all the available proceedings from 1952 onwards were consulted. The study was
mainly based on the interview and discussions with the woman legislators and it has
great value in understanding the extent and nature of their involvement into politics.

The majority of the woman legislators expressed their inability to send a written
response to the questionnaire and collection of information on specific issues from
women became extremely difficult. Arranging the timings formulating with the woman
leaders for interview, which proved to be an extremely challenging task in terms of
their availability and also their willingness to cooperate. Continuous efforts were
made to contact them.

The Chapter scheme of the present thesis are as follows—Chapter I entitled
"Introduction" is intended to study the ‘Feminist Theory’, Demographic pattern in
Legislative Assembly’, ‘Political Participation of Women’, ‘Women and Political
Parties’ and ‘Entry of Women into Politics’. The Feminist agrees on the point that
women are bereft of powers and they should be empowered. The demographic pattern
of the women in the country is always less than the male and in Assam it is below the
national level. The number of female in the State is in a decreasing trend. So far as
the status of women are concerned, they enjoy a secondary status in all sphere of life.
In spite of her great sacrifice towards the State her position has not been upgraded. A
society cannot progress without the contribution of womenfolk. Women are regarded
as the property of others in a patriarchal society and this is the situation for women
throughout the world. The Legislature is the representative body, constituted by the
people through which the public grievances can be redressed. It is the media through
which the public will can be focused. The Legislature in Assam is called as the Assam
Legislative Assembly consisting of only one Chamber. The Government of India
Act of 1935 provides for bicameralism i.e., the Assam Legislative Assembly and the
Legislative Council, which was abolished in 1947. The Assam Legislative Assembly
is a democratic body composed of the members elected by the people of the State.
Regarding the status of women in the Lok Sabha are concerned, very few women were elected to the highest legislative body from Assam. Though the number of woman members in the Lok Sabha from Assam was few but their performances are significant and their contributions cannot be neglected. The election results of the Assam Legislative Assembly present a very discouraging picture. The male always dominated over female. The number of woman representatives in the legislative body is marginal. Political participation is the process through which a person displays a role in the political life of the society. It is not only the exercise of powers but covers all the activities relating to the exercise of powers. It covers all the forms of actions by which the citizens take part in the operations of State machinery. Political parties consider women as a backward section and are reluctant to select women as contesting candidates. All the political parties except Congress party more or less has the same attitude towards women. Political parties consider women as substitute workers but not as contesting candidates against the male section of the society. The chapter concludes with the women’s entry into politics, which was started with their participation in the freedom struggle. That women of Assam did a gallant role in the freedom movement is a story of devotion, sacrifice and patriotism.

Chapter II starts with the title “Social Status of Women” which is intended to study on the points- ‘Women, Customs and Traditions’, ‘Women and Family’, ‘Changing Trends in Assam’, ‘Women and Education’ and ‘Women and Social Change’. Women enjoy a low status in the society. Customs and traditions play a dominant role in determining the status of women. Though the evil customs and traditions has been abolished but still their effects are continuing in a different form in the society. The position of women in the family is deteriorating day by day. Inspite of her great sacrifice towards the family, she is ill treated by her husband and in-laws. She is to tolerate all the tortures silently. Regarding the changing trends in Assam, a slow change is noticed in the thoughts of women towards the family and the society. Girls in the Assamese society are no longer dependent on customs and traditions and want to establish her in the family and in the society. Education is the media through which a woman can identify herself, establish her and ultimately can interfere in the nation building process of the country. Education empowers women and through empowerment they will be able to challenge all the superstitions and bindings imposed (v)
on her. The Chapter concludes with the title ‘women and the social change’. Changes take place due to the changes in the society. Inspite of the changes the position and status of women did not change.

Chapter III entitled “Women and the Constitution of India” which is intended to study the following points—‘Deliberations in the Constituent Assembly’, ‘Constitutional Provisions’, ‘Fundamental Rights’, ‘Directive Principles of State Policy’, ‘Election’, ‘Women related Plans, Acts, Projects, and Schemes’. Despite women’s participation and dedication in the freedom struggle of the country, they were not well represented from all the areas of the country in the Constituent Assembly, which was created for the preparation of a Constitution of its own. They were deprived of membership of the important Committees. No discussion was held in the Constituent Assembly about the women related issues. The Constitution has guaranteed certain basic rights which the State must follow to establish justice in the society in the form of Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy and Election laws—the principle is directly laid down. The Constitution has adopted the democratic system of administration where the voice of the people is respected. There are Fundamental Duties, women related Acts, projects and schemes for the protection and welfare of women but all these provisions could do a very little service in establishing equality between men and women in the society because the society is on the verge of gender deprivation. Only legal steps are not sufficient to remove all this biasness from the society, the ideas and thoughts about women are to be changed.

Chapter IV deals with the “Social Background of the Woman Legislator’s” which studies the woman legislators in the Parliament from Assam and in the State Legislative Assembly. They are mostly from the rich families with political linkages. Majority of them are from the high caste Hindus. Most of the woman legislators belonged to educated, urban and middle class families with a good exposure to politics from the childhood. Widows of some political leaders are active in politics. Middle-aged women are more akin to come to politics.

(vi)
The Chapter V entitled “Personal Profile of the Woman Legislators” which studies the demographic characteristic of the respondents, their socio-political background, their emergence as leaders, their role as politicians and their participation in the Parliamentary and Assembly proceedings. Women at the middle age group, urban areas and from the general caste are more active in politics.

"Women as Contestants" has been highlighted in the Chapter VI, which depicts a dismal picture. Women constitute 45 to 50 percent of the country’s total electorate but their representation in the legislative body is totally disproportionate to their strength in the country’s population. Despite their awareness about their rights and duties, their participation and strength in the various elective bodies has not been increased. The election results of the Lok Sabha and Assam Legislative Assembly reveals that more women are contesting as candidates. Deprived by the political parties, women are to contest election as Independent candidates and there is the risk of winning because the banner of the political parties are needed who are very reluctant to choose woman as candidates. Congress party is to some extent liberal in selecting women and most of the women legislators elected were from the Congress party.

Chapter VII deals with the “Issues of Women” which studies the issues of women raised by the woman members on the floor of the Assembly and Parliament. Majority of the women were conscious of women’s issues but that does not figure significantly during the Assembly sessions because there is the tendency of overlooking the matter. Inspite of their awareness about women issues, they are not getting importance due to the lack of women’s initiatives. Woman members though participated in the debates and discussions of the Legislature but seldom dealt with the women related problems.

The Chapter VIII deals with “Status in Politics” which is intended to study woman as Ministers in the Union Council of Ministers, woman as Ministers in the State Council of Ministers, members of the Committees, Speaker and Deputy Speaker. The Ministerial profile of the woman legislators both at the Centre and in the States shows that very few women have shouldered the responsibility of Ministership. No woman from Assam became the Cabinet Minister and only two women became the Deputy/State Minister of less influential departments. In the State level administration
too, only a limited number of women were assigned to the ministry of Cabinet rank. Women are always allotted less important departments. Regarding Committee assignments too, women are appointed as members of the women specific Committees. More challenging departments and Committees are always kept for the male section of the society. No woman either from Assam or from the rest of the country honoured the post of speaker in the Lok Sabha /State Assembly. Only one woman from Assam became the Deputy Chairperson of the State Legislative Assembly.

Chapter IX entitled “Women and General Issues” which studies the role of woman legislators both in the Parliament and in the State Legislative Assembly in raising the various issues on the floor of the Legislature. Woman Legislators of Assam were busy in solving the general developmental problems of their respective constituencies.

I explored all available materials that are needed, and they have been used in the present work. All observations and facts in the following were reported as they came to my notice. I bear the responsibility for all the views expressed and the shortcomings this dissertation might possess.

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