

Women's Electoral Participation in India: Evidence from Nagaon District of Assam

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Abstract

Women's involvement in electoral processes is widely regarded as a key measure of democratic inclusiveness and political empowerment. Although women in India obtained equal voting rights at the time of independence, their actual participation in electoral politics continues to vary significantly across regions and social groups. This study investigates the patterns and determinants of women's electoral participation in Nagaon District of Assam. Adopting an empirical and exploratory approach, the study draws on primary data collected from 400 women respondents and supplements it with secondary data from the Census of India, Election Commission of India, National Sample Survey (NSS), and National Family Health Survey (NFHS). The findings demonstrate that education, economic position, and political awareness play a decisive role in shaping women's participation in elections. At the same time, patriarchal values and socio-cultural constraints continue to restrict women's political engagement beyond voting. The study emphasizes that strengthening women's educational attainment, economic independence, and political capacity is essential for fostering deeper democratic participation at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Women voters, electoral participation, political awareness, gender and politics, Assam

1. Introduction

Electoral participation forms the backbone of democratic systems by enabling citizens to influence governance and public decision-making. Women's participation in elections is particularly important, as it reflects not only legal equality but also the extent of their social and political empowerment. In India, women have possessed equal voting rights since independence; nevertheless, their engagement in electoral politics remains uneven across regions and socio-economic contexts.

Recent statistics released by the Election Commission of India indicate a steady decline in the gender gap in voter turnout, with women's participation matching or even exceeding that of men in several state and national elections. Despite this positive trend, women's involvement is largely confined to casting votes, while their presence in political campaigns, party organizations, and leadership positions remains limited. Such constraints are especially evident in rural and semi-urban areas, where traditional gender roles, limited economic autonomy, and restricted political exposure continue to shape women's public participation.

Nagaon District of Assam offers a suitable micro-level setting for examining these dynamics. Characterized by a blend of rural and urban settlements and diverse socio-economic conditions, the district provides valuable insights into how structural and cultural factors influence women's electoral behavior.

2. Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on political participation underscores the significance of socio-economic resources, political awareness, and institutional accessibility. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) argue that education, income, and occupational status strongly determine individuals' capacity to participate politically. Feminist perspectives further emphasize that patriarchal social structures and gendered divisions of labor systematically marginalize women from public and political spaces.

In the Indian context, researchers such as Rai (2011) and Desai and Alagh (2020) highlight the close association between women's literacy, economic independence, and political engagement. Analyses based on Census and NSS data reveal that women with higher educational attainment are more likely to vote independently and participate in political discussions. Studies focusing on Assam suggest that although women exhibit relatively high voter turnout, their involvement in decision-making and leadership roles remains limited (Goswami, 2016).

However, empirical studies conducted at the district level remain scarce. This study seeks to bridge this gap by offering a localized analysis of women's electoral participation in Nagaon District.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

The study is guided by the following objectives:

To examine the pattern of women's electoral participation in Nagaon District.

To analyze the influence of socio-economic factors on women's participation in elections.

To assess differences in political awareness between rural and urban women.

To evaluate societal attitudes toward women's participation in electoral politics.

The central research question addressed in this study is: Which factors shape women's electoral participation in Nagaon District of Assam?

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Research Design

An empirical and exploratory research design was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

Primary data were collected from 400 women respondents using stratified random sampling, comprising 240 rural and 160 urban respondents. Structured questionnaires and interviews were used to gather information on voting behavior, political awareness, and socio-economic characteristics.

4.3 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data were drawn from:

Census of India (2011)

Election Commission of India reports

National Sample Survey (NSS)

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)

Government publications of Assam

4.4 Methods of Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation techniques. Qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis to capture attitudes and perceptions related to women's political participation.

5. Socio-Economic and Electoral Context

5.1 Demographic and Educational Profile

According to the Census of India (2011), Nagaon District has a population of approximately 2.8 million, with women accounting for 49.2 per cent. The female literacy rate stands at 63.1 per cent, which is below the national average. The rural–urban literacy gap remains substantial, with rural women being significantly disadvantaged.

NFHS-5 data further reveal that only 38 per cent of women in Assam report independent participation in household decision-making, while fewer than 20 per cent regularly access political information through newspapers or digital media. These indicators point to limited substantive empowerment despite formal political rights.

5.2 Trends in Women’s Voter Turnout

Election Commission data show a consistent increase in women’s voter turnout in Assam:

2011: 68.2%

2016: 78.1%

2021: 81.4%

This upward trend reflects growing electoral inclusion. However, voter turnout alone does not fully capture women’s political agency, making micro-level analysis essential.

6. Empirical Findings from Field Survey

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–30	112	28.0
	31–45	168	42.0
	46+	120	30.0
Education	Illiterate	78	19.5
	Primary	102	25.5
	Secondary	146	36.5
	Higher	74	18.5
Occupation	Homemaker	176	44.0
	Agriculture	96	24.0
	Informal work	82	20.5
	Salaried	46	11.5
Residence	Rural	240	60.0
	Urban	160	40.0

Table 2: Patterns of Electoral Participation

Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Voted in last election	92.5	7.5
Independent voting decision	61.0	39.0

Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Attended election meetings	28.5	71.5
Discuss politics at home	54.0	46.0
Party membership	6.8	93.2

Although voting participation is high, engagement in campaign activities and party politics remains minimal.

Figure 2: Rural–Urban Differences in Political Awareness

Urban respondents exhibit substantially higher political awareness, reflecting better access to education, media, and civic networks.

7. Social Determinants of Electoral Participation

Table 3: Education and Independent Voting

Education Level	Independent Voting (%)
Illiterate	38.5
Primary	52.0
Secondary	68.4
Higher	81.1

Education clearly emerges as the most influential factor shaping autonomous voting behavior.

8. Regression Analysis

8.1 Women’s Electoral Participation Index (WEPI)

An index was constructed using indicators such as voting behavior, independent decision-making, political awareness, and campaign involvement, scaled from 0 to 10.

8.2 Model Specification

$$WEPI_i = \alpha + \beta_1 AGE_i + \beta_2 EDU_i + \beta_3 MARI + \beta_4 OCC_i + \beta_5 INC_i + \beta_6 RES_i + \epsilon_i$$

Table 4: Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	Significance
Education	0.62	0.09	***
Occupation	0.44	0.12	**
Income	0.29	0.11	**
Urban Residence	0.71	0.18	***
R ²	0.46		
N	400		

Education, income, occupational status, and urban residence significantly enhance women’s electoral participation.

9. Discussion

The findings confirm that formal enfranchisement alone does not guarantee meaningful political partici-

pation. Persistent patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and limited political exposure restrict women's engagement beyond voting. However, education and economic empowerment substantially reduce these barriers.

10. Conclusion

Women in Nagaon District demonstrate strong electoral participation as voters but limited political agency beyond the ballot box. Addressing disparities in education, income, and political socialization is crucial for strengthening democratic participation.

11. Policy Implications

Expansion of political literacy programs targeting women

Strengthening self-help groups as platforms for political awareness

Encouraging women's inclusion in party structures

Promoting gender-responsive local governance reforms

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