

Women's Political Participation In Arunachal Pradesh: Insights From Tribal Social Structures

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Abstract:

The Political Participation of women is crucial for inclusive democratic political processes, where women have the autonomy to exercise their own political rights, such as the Right to contest elections, the Right to vote, freedom of speech and expression and participate in decision-making. Democratic principles call for political equality, which means that women must have a seat at the decision-making table and must be able to influence laws. Women's political participation is essential and empowering, as it advocates for their rights and promotes equality. However, women in Arunachal have come a long way since its first assembly election in 1978. Their entry into the modern democratic system has been slow and uneven. It had women MLAs and women's participation in the grassroots system yet women's representation in politics in general remains abysmal. This paper seeks to examine the barriers as well as possible mechanisms to enhance the integration of women's active political participation in driving social change.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Political Participation, Arunachal Pradesh.

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I. Introduction:

The Political Participation of women is crucial for inclusive democratic political processes, where women have the autonomy to exercise their own political rights, such as the Right to contest elections, the Right to vote, and participate in decision-making. Democratic principles call for political equality, which means that women must have a seat at the decision-making table and must be able to influence laws. Women's political participation is essential and empowering, as it advocates for their rights and promoting equality. These movements focus on civil rights law, which protects against discrimination based on gender, race, and other characteristics. This legal framework has been crucial in challenging unfair practices and ensuring that women have a voice in society. Historically, women's rights movements have addressed various inequalities worldwide. One of the major achievements was the fight for women's suffrage, which led to women gaining the right to vote, marking a major step in political empowerment. This legal change allowed women to participate in the democratic process and influence decisions that affect their lives. Political participation is a key area where women's political movements have made a difference. Women can now run for office and influence policies that impact their communities. This increase in representation in politics allows for diverse perspectives and better decision-making. Moreover, women's political movements have driven social change by challenging stereotypes and advocating gender equality. These efforts have transformed societal views on women's roles in education, employment, and leadership. As a result, women are increasingly seen as equals in various aspects of life. This movement empowers women by securing legal rights, promoting political participation, and driving social and economic change. By continuing to advocate for equality, women must enter a political movement that could help create a more just and inclusive society for everyone.

The journey of Arunachal Pradesh from the North-East Frontier Agency to full statehood in 1987 represents a significant process of political evolution, administrative restructuring, and the gradual empowerment of its indigenous communities within the Indian Union. Located along the India's international borders with China (especially with the Tibet Autonomous Region) to the north, Bhutan to the west and Myanmar to the east. Characterized by its diverse tribal ethnicity, cultures, language, and operating the chain of lifestyle of its people by customary law (Hina, 2012). It has 28 major tribes and more than 100 subtribes, such major tribes include the Adi, Apatani, Nyishi, Galo, Monpa, Mishmi, Tagin, Wancho, Nocte, Sherdukpan, and Singpho etc. Each tribe have their own unique Traditional Village Councils, however several function and features are common which play an important role in governance and community day-to-day life since time immemorial (ELWIN, 1965a). These councils are headed by village elders and take the task of resolving disputes, providing welfare, and

protecting social customs. Such as KEBANG of the Adi tribe, BULIANG of the Apatani tribe, GINGDUNG of the Nyishi tribe, TSORGEN of the Monpa tribe, ABBALA of the Idu Mishmi tribe, NGOTHUN of the Nocte tribe, MOKCHUP of the Khampti tribe (Elwin, 1965b). The Status of women in the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh reflects a unique blend of roles and responsibilities. On one side of the coin women have an acknowledged role in socio-economic, and cultural arenas, a wide range of activities covering from festival, agriculture, religion and community gathering which would be incomplete without women (Gammeng, 2022a) and On the other side of the coin, women's participation in the decision- making bodies of these councils is relatively absent, as noted in the Buliang-Village Traditional Council of the Apatani (Dinsu, 2018). Traditionally this tribal leadership has been to a great extent male-dominated field, with women being debared from participation in the field by deciding that women's role would be confined only to family affairs and economic affairs. However, women in Arunachal have come a long way since its first assembly election in 1978. Their entry into the modern democratic system has been slow and uneven. It had women MLAs and women participation in the grassroots system yet women's representation in politics remains abysmal. Women occasionally active in huge numbers in election campaigns and primarily as voters. Women voters have now outnumbered male voters in 2024 (The Arunachal Times, 2024).

II. Objectives:

1. Seeking to identify the socio, cultural, economic, and political barriers that limit women's engagement in politics.
2. Analyzing the enabling factors that support women's entry into politics

III. Methodology:

The study adopts descriptive and analytical methods. Information is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, research papers, websites, and other sources.

Table 1: Total women candidate in State Legislative Assembly Election, 2024.

Sno	Candidate	Constituency	Party	Criminal Case	Education	Total Assets	Liabilities
1	Chakat Aboh	KHONSA WEST (ST)	BJP	0	12th Pass	Rs 12,73,24,358 ~ 12 Crore+	Rs 0 ~
2	Dasanglu Pul	HAYULIANG (ST)	BJP	0	12th Pass	Rs 10,49,88,837 ~ 10 Crore+	Rs 0 ~
3	Gollo Yapung Tana	PAKKE- KASANG (ST)	INC	0	10th Pass	Rs 12,52,071 ~ 12 Lacs+	Rs 0 ~
4	Jeremai Krong	TEZU (ST)	INC	0	Graduate	Rs 13,27,371 ~ 13 Lacs+	Rs 3,34,939 ~ 3 Lacs+
5	Marina Kenglang	CHANGLANG NORTH (ST)	INC	0	Graduate	Rs 2,22,36,027 ~ 2 Crore+	Rs 21,77,215 ~ 21 Lacs+
6	Nyabi Jini Dirchi	BASAR (ST)	BJP	0	Graduate	Rs 35,24,93,32 ~35 crore+	Rs 0 ~
7	Tsering Lhamu	LUMLA (ST)	BJP	0	Postgraduate	Rs 81,80,45,651 ~ 81 Crore+	Rs 35,08,786 ~ 35 Lacs+

Source: Based on data collected from the website MyNeta.info.

Socio, cultural, economic, and political barriers (Objective 1).

Tribal politics: The determining factor for influencing voting behavior in Arunachal society includes elements such as Family, kinship, tribes rather than party-affiliated ideology (Bath, 2003). However, women to a great extent not necessarily enjoy exercise their Voting franchise on their own. Most Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh follow social structures that are patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal in nature. Accordingly, it is always the male figure who decides for the entire family. It may be either the father, brother, or uncle who would make the decision for whom to vote. Women matter only as a vote bank. Women's voting rights are restricted in the sense that they are compelled to vote according to their family's decision rather than their own choice. This phenomenon in Arunachal is pervasive in every tribal community. As of 2024 women voters have outnumbered male voters and yet, they all fall when it comes to the actual test of "empowerment"- sharing political power. According to Kaye (2024) "one striking feature in electoral processes in Arunachal Pradesh is that female electorates in the state seem not to be in favor of female candidates, otherwise many female contestants would have won the seats they contested". This could be a direct reflection of the limited adult franchise of tribal women, which influences their voting decisions. In traditional tribal-oriented societies, strong emphasis is placed on family, kinship, community, and one's own tribe as the foundation of social life, and political decisions are often reserved for the male members of the family.

Internalized patriarchy and structural challenges: In local governance systems like panchayat and zilla parishad, where 33% women's reservation exists, the culture of Male domination continues to influence the local governance system. It deprives women citizens of a leader who genuinely represents them. At the village level, well-off families continue to dominate local politics by making every possible effort to keep power within their control. The seat falls under women-reserved categories, where women candidates are elected on paper while the men of their house yield power and decision. Stemming from deep-rooted patriarchy, practices like these defy the whole purpose of reservation as women sarpanches end up as names on the government list. The handful of women politicians that are inside the circle are, in a manner, 'tamed' to fit into the political and social narratives on patriarchal terms. If women have been in politics for more than 16 to 20 years of period it is because of her affiliation with family, peers and husband who have been involved in politics (Boko, 2016). Something that a lot of women do not have is domestic freedom as they are restricted by their domestic challenges which is an outcome of structural inequality. Many women are expected to play the triple role when they enter politics (Ramya, 2018). Management of the household, working to meet the economic needs of the family, and involvement in political activities. Without adequate help and support women tend to be skeptical of entering politics.

Societal prejudice: Moreover, there is societal prejudice in the tribal communities. when women do not hold meaningful positions in decision-making structures, their issues fail to find space in policy formulation and programme implementation, such as gender-based violence, Marriage law, Inheritance law, and Ecological law etc. During Cabinet formation, women are commonly allotted ministries that are termed as 'feminine' portfolios which are perceived as relatively less important, with fewer resources and reach among citizens (Rai, 2011). Portfolios like Women, children, social welfare, and cultural affairs. So far in the Arunachal state assembly there have been only two female cabinet ministers. The first ever woman appointed cabinet minister was Komoli Mossang in 1990 during Gegong Apang's regime and after 3 decades we have another woman cabinet minister who is smti Dassanglu Pul currently holding portfolios of women and child development, science and technology, and cultural affairs. Women are actually concerned in every single space of political issues and various aspect of decision-making that impacts a woman. There is a tick mark in the box for every government portfolio as soon as a woman minister is appointed for the child and welfare ministry. Women can talk about finance, climate change, and illegal immigration issues which is an important aspect that women can speak about because it impacts their socio-eco-political life. Women should be given opportunity to claim their space and not be limited to only 'feminist' issues.

Lack of role model: Men are surrounded by a million role models but in the case of their female counterparts there are comparatively none in Arunachal. Many elected women MLAs and grassroots leaders could not create much impact and could not inspire the female population because they were not given proper opportunities by their male colleagues (Kaye, 2024). Men can accompany their politician even if a meeting happens at 10 pm, or a rally happens at 10 pm. Setting up of political ecosystem with the assumption that women have no role in it. And yet, women are half the voting population and have guaranteed political equality by the Constitution. So, these are huge challenges for women. There is a need for more women who are role models for the younger generation in politics. According to the study findings in India that the increase in women village leaders had reduced the "aspiration gap" between girls and boys by nearly 25% and reversed the gender gap in educational outcomes as well as girls are taking active participation outside of their household in a region with increased women's leadership in the village (Baeman, lori, & others, 2012). In colleges, universities, and Student unions leadership roles are often filled by men. women who make it to the university level prefer to focus on their studies and try to distance themselves from so-called-dirty-politics. This negative notion of politics being dirty politics plays a huge part in families and their support system finding it dangerous or unsafe for young women to get into politics. This adds to the vicious cycle of politics continuing to be a male-dominated field.

Economic barriers: The other challenge is money. Money has emerged as one of the dominant forces shaping the politics of Arunachal Pradesh which can be acquired by selling property and Assets as contesting an election is costly. Women of any tribe and any level of education are on average poorer than men because of their lack of property and assets. Immovable property like agricultural fields, real estate, and other property is traditionally inherited and divided among the sons of the family while daughters may receive some moveable property like local beads, bracelets and traditional bowls and plates, etc. (Gammeng, 2022b). They are typically dependent upon their husband after getting married and even if they turn out to be economically independent and depend upon their hard-earned minimum income and having assets in their name, they don't have the agency to decide to spend it any way they want. Specifically, spending on elections is discouraged among family members. Whereas it's much more possible that males in the family have control over the financial decision-making even if the money belongs to the women.

Analyzing the enabling factors that support women's entry into politics (objective 2).

Education: Education has been one of the crucial factors that has improved the lives of tribal women. It helps them to develop their personality. Education gave them the edge to be well versed with their dignity, rights and issues irrespective of not owning family property or assets. When women are educated, they are more tilted towards economic opportunity. It empowers women to purchase their own property which makes them stand out and eventually be recognized in society. Findings suggest a close relationship exist between the variable's educational attainment and women's empowerment in economic life (Bage, 2004). Educated women can make more informed choices and informed decisions which will help them address their own political issues. Education is "potential affirming and performance confirming" (Priyadarshini, 2020). It basically implies that education nurtures and validates certain hidden abilities and capabilities of a woman and serves as a tool and measure to confirm how well that potential is being realized through actual performance. During the 2024 State Assembly Election of Arunachal Pradesh, as shown in Table 1, all the candidates had passed Class 10 and above. Among them, 4 out of 7 candidates for the MLA elections were graduates. Such exposure to education can build confidence in communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills that are essential for political life.

Reservation: In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, the modern grassroots governance system such as Panchayati Raj Institution guided by the Constitution of India, has significantly expanded political liberty of tribal women by encouraging them to contest elections, thereby empowering them (Yakar, 2023). Tribal Village Council have never taken any initiatives to include women in the decision-making process and this form of discrimination has grown out of time-tested customs. In present day of Arunachal Pradesh, one-third of all Panchayat seats are reserved for women through a rotational system across different constituencies which create a platform for women to express their views and have their own voices. Setting target to bring more women into the field of politics could lead to positive outcomes. Lots of countries introduced them to bring more equality. Rwanda in Africa has the most women in parliament. Currently, Rwanda leads globally in women's political representation with 63.8% of parliamentary seats held by women (IPU, 2025) but it wasn't always like this. Back in the 1990s women only made up a small share of their parliamentary seats so in 2003 the country set a goal to make 30% of their elected politician women and it worked. Today they make up nearly two-thirds of the Rwandan parliament. Even though not everyone thinks quotas like Rwanda's are the best solution but it's hard to argue that they don't make a difference. Mamta Bannerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal thrice in a row, has given 40% tickets to women candidates for the Lok Sabha election 2019 at a time that most parties don't even field 8 to 10% women (Times of India, 2019). Hence to enhance women's political participation can be facilitated by implementing gender-based reservations, which would create institutional opportunities for women in the state.

Social media: Social media changed political games. In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, collected data indicates that a majority of contesting candidates have utilized Facebook as a key platform to reach voters. (Savio & Lowang, 2025). Social media plays a major role in empowering women in political processes. Women connecting through social media platforms feel that they are part of something large. This impact is possible because of social media, print media, and the many resources available today, which in one way or another helps include women in political conversation. Women use social media to amplify their views and voices, and to collaborate with other women and youth across different backgrounds. In this sense, social media has transformed the way politicians communicate. Campaigns today are very different. Candidates use features of social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to share their experiences with issues ranging from unemployment, discrimination to debt. Voters see these stories, relate to them, feel galvanized, and even contribute financially to support those campaigns.

Awareness: One of the positive things that is happening in Arunachal is that there is mushrooming of institutions that are trying to provide basic skills for women wanting to enter politics. Each tribe in Arunachal Pradesh has at least one women's organization, and at the state level, the "All Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society", formed on 10 October 1979 with representatives from all the indigenous tribes, functions as the apex body with its headquarters in Itanagar (Pandey, 1997). Other institutions include self-help groups (SHGs), Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs), Women's wings of political parties, and Arunachal youth parliament, all of them are working toward mobilizing, training women and making them aware of the importance of their political rights, liberty and justice. Such programme covering how to do fundraising, how to run a campaign, how to mobilize volunteers, how to figure out campaign strategy, how to communicate, how to use social media etc. Many women do not know how to raise money from the public, they think they have to bring their own money. Many women are not less equipped it is just that men get that exposure over a period of time because patriarchal society does not prevent them from getting that necessary exposure. Awareness could bring about enough change in women's perception regarding politics to encourage them to participate in politics in its

true sense- not merely as voters or campaigners, but in leadership positions.

IV. Conclusion:

Since the creation of Arunachal Pradesh as a state, women's participation in electoral politics has remained low. Over the decades, as more women gained access to education, they entered the workforce and became increasingly politically aware. This growing awareness enabled them to assert their electoral rights as voters and campaigners, resulting in women voting in numbers almost equal to men—an important step toward political equality. However, the number of women contesting elections has remained disproportionately low compared to men. Several factors contribute in various forms of structural disadvantages-Social, economic, culture, and politics. Elections are time-consuming processes that require candidates to spend extended periods away from home for campaigning, a commitment that is often possible only with a supportive family system. In many cases, this support is limited for women, thereby constraining their political participation as candidates. Therefore, strengthening institutional support, enhancing political literacy, and creating inclusive party structures are essential for bridging this gap. Ultimately, empowering women politically in tribal states is not only a matter of representation but also a necessary step toward more responsive, equitable, and participatory governance.

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