

## Dismal Politics: Gender, Risk Aversion and Political Parties in Assam

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### Abstract

*Women's low representation in the electoral process has triggered attention not just from scholars but from civil society as well. Arguments have hinged mostly around the inevitability of interventions like gender quotas to counteract the historical as well as social disadvantages that have hindered women's participation and representation in legislative bodies. Studies have also probed the reluctance of political parties in upholding women's candidature due to their inherent patriarchal bias. The present study is an attempt to investigate the ways in which political parties help or hinder women aspirants in politics. It uses data from the Assam Legislative Assembly elections from 1962-2021 to study the patterns in which women are recruited by different political parties and the implications thereof. By using not just nomination data but also deposit forfeiture data, the paper is able to show the centrality of political parties in augmenting the chances of women's electoral success. It was seen that as far as women candidates are concerned all the categories of political parties display risk-aversion. Especially, National and State Parties which have become extremely crucial within the electoral system use higher standards of selection while nominating women. Moreover, as parties are unwilling to put stakes upon women, they tend to mainly nominate women who bring with them the social capital from kinship networks. Therefore, the domain of electoral politics not only continues to be gendered but also dismal.*

### Introduction

The elections to fifteenth legislative assembly elections of Assam were held in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic- March and April 2021- and recorded a spectacular voter turnout of 81.8%. With the visible angst against the Citizenship Amendment Act across the state in 2019, the election was seen as an opportune moment by the anti-incumbents to raise it as a core poll issue. The protests against the CAA, which began in December 2019 saw the participation of thousands of women and awakened

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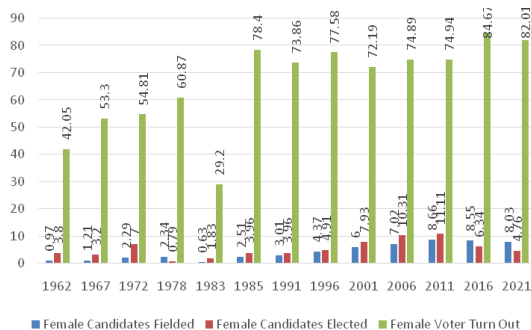
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memories of the Assam Agitation. In close resemblance to the political developments after the agitation, in this instance too, women’s participation in the protest movements did not pave the way for increased representation of women in the legislative body. In fact, in comparison to the previous elections of 2016 when eight women returned as legislators, the number declined to six. In a house of 126 members, therefore, women constituted merely 4.76% which is the lowest since the 1991 elections when it was 3.96%. The maximum number of women was elected to the thirteenth legislative assembly though it did not even cross 12%. The decline is specifically worrisome as the percentage of women contesting the elections has roughly been similar and yet there has been a decline in the number of successful candidates. Accompanied by the fact that female voter turnout in 2021 exceeded male voter turnout by 0.41%, paradoxical questions regarding women’s participation and representation in politics have arisen. As Figure 1 below shows, there was no positive impact of women electoral turnout on women’s political representation.

If the Lok Sabha results of 2019 from Assam are examined, a similar pattern can be seen there as well. While seventeenth Lok Sabha returned the highest number of women members to the Parliament (14.6%), the number of female candidates elected from the state declined from 14.28% in 2014 to 7.14% in 2019. This is, despite the fact, that the female voter turnout in Assam (81.3%) was substantially higher than the All-India levels (60.9%). Thus, the case of Assam provides another example where even though women are being recognised as voting blocs, the glass ceiling at the highest echelons of power continues to endure.

**Figure 1: Comparison of Female Voter Turnout, Female Candidates Fielded and Elected**



Source: Author’s own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

Assam provides an interesting micro-study of how women’s substantial presence in informal politics does not transform into increased participation in the electoral arena. Assam was one of the first states to reserve fifty per cent of seats for women in its village-level bodies, thereby allowing more women to be trained in politics since 2012. Despite this, political parties continue to discriminate against women when the ticket distributions for Legislative Assembly happen. This paper uses data from

the Legislative Assembly elections from 1962-2021, as available on the website of the Election Commission of India, though the focus is mainly on 2016 and 2021. The data takes 1962 as the starting point as gender-disaggregated data collection was not followed by the ECI prior to that. By using election data from thirteen assembly elections, the paper argues that the political parties, especially National Parties have a significant role to play in ensuring women's success in state-level politics. Therefore, when political parties continue to be negative gatekeepers for women candidates, achieving gender parity in political representation becomes nearly impossible. The paper starts with the use of aggregate data and moves beyond it by discussing the variations within the parties in the nomination of specific women candidates. By doing so, the paper also aims to establish that women candidates are adversely placed in comparison to men when it comes to nomination. The paper agrees with Carole Spary's (2014, 2020) basic argument that political parties use higher standards in women's recruitment due to their risk-averse stance and uses the case of Assam legislative Assembly elections to examine the same.

The present paper while attempting to investigate the impact of party nominations on women's candidature does so by structuring the argument into four segments. The first section deals with trends in the nomination of female candidates in the legislative assembly elections from 1962 onwards. Herein, the attempt is not just to look at the variation within the parties across the years but also to examine the implications of being nominated by political parties vis-à-vis fighting the elections as Independents. The second section of the paper discusses the variation across the political parties: national, state and Registered Unrecognised Parties. As Assam has been witness to strong regional parties, this section throws light on if State Parties are similar or different in the way it treats female political aspirants. The third section of the paper uses data on forfeiture of deposits by the male as well as female candidates to understand if and how participation has differential financial impacts for men and women. The final segment of the paper is interested in uncovering the familiarity of women contestants with their constituencies-not only by using the classification that Spary develops but also by exploring how kinship networks affects political opportunity. In 'Women Candidates and Party Nomination Trends in India- Evidence from the 2009 General Election', Carol Spary develops two predictors for testing the winnability of women candidates: first, the distinction between marginal and non-marginal seats and, second, constituency familiarity. Within Spary's (2014) formulation, a marginal seat is 'one where in the previous election, the margin of votes was 5 per cent votes or less' (Ibid: 128) while 'a non-marginal seat may be either a safe seat if the sitting MP is from the same party or an unwinnable seat if the incumbent is from a rival party' (Ibid: 128). She clarifies that higher number of nominations do not guarantee that the number of women elected may necessarily rise due to the nature of the constituency from where women are contesting. As parties determine not just the contestant but also the constituencies, an examination of the constituency can provide valuable insights into how political parties view female candidates.

In addition to the marginal-non marginal distinction of seats, familiarity with the constituency adds another dimension to examine the proportion of women candidates nominated by political parties and the likelihood of their success (Ibid: 128). Spary (2014) provides a three-fold model for categorising candidates based on their constituency familiarity. As per this model, Category A refers to situation where the same individual candidates are re-nominated from the same constituency by the same party as the previous election, Category B refers to as the scenario where the party which was either the winner or the first runners up in the last two elections changed its candidate and Category C is where neither the candidate nor the party was the winner or the first runners up in the last two elections. Spary explains that,

*candidates in categories A and B are deemed to have a higher chance of success because they are a known quantity with established links in the constituency. Candidates and parties classified in category C are determined as relative outsiders for the purpose of comparison and assumed to be less likely to win. (Ibid, 2014: 129)*

What emerges from the study is that within the emerging electoral system, the success of women candidates is leveraged upon the support from National Parties but, unlike men. There are stringent conditionalities' on women's recruitment. This can only be explained through the long-standing risk-aversiveness that political parties display towards women's candidature.

### **Trends in the Participation of Female Candidates**

Gender differences in political behaviour started to receive consistent academic attention with the works of scholars like Nelson and Caudhuri (1999), Paxton (1997), Norris (2005), Lovenduski (2005) and Tremblay (2007) among others. Though the presence of women in protest movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s made political parties across the world cognisant of women as consequential political actors, there has been a glaring absence of women in legislative bodies. As discussed above, the Indian scenario also presents a similar picture where women's political participation as voters has increased manifold without any substantial change in women contesting elections. Kapoor and Ravi (2014) point out that the poll percentage of women started increasing in the 1980s and the pace became faster in the two subsequent decades. The increase in voluntary participation of women across all the states has been interpreted as 'a silent revolution' in Indian democracy and is indicative of women's self-empowerment (Ibid.). Kumar and Gupta (2015) indicate that the increase in women's turnout is worth noting as it 'not only has an intrinsic value but also generates certain positive externalities' (p.17), one of which is the expectation that female voters, as a bloc, are being able to exert pressure on political parties for feminising the electoral arena (Krishnaswamy, 2022). Arguments explaining the increase in women's turn out include empowerment, better literacy rates, increasing media exposure, changes in decision making within the household, efforts by the Election Commission of India,

safe and secure voting procedures, women's participation in local elections, solidarity formed through self-help groups and political participation as a mechanism for being heard (Banerjee, 2022). Despite this noteworthy emergence of women as an interest group, women's issues continue to be an add-on to legislative deliberation and policy decisions. As Kittilson (2016) states, 'casting the ballot is the most ubiquitous form of participation and carries the least amount of policy-specific input' (p. 12). Effectively, therefore, the attention is turned towards the necessity of women's presence beyond voting.

Praveen Rai's (2017) pyramid shaped multi-stratified participatory model is able to show the differentials at different levels of electoral participation. Despite the formidable presence of women as voters, the number of women progressively decreases as political engagement increases. Therefore, we have lesser number of women as contestants when compared to campaigners for political parties which in turn is lesser than the voters. At the top of this pyramid sits the scant number of elected women legislators (Rai, 2017). The feminisation of politics thesis, thus, has a limited applicability as 'women's representation at national and state level rajniti remains at abysmally low levels' (Banerjee, 2022: 23). The incongruence between the number of women in 'lokniti' and 'rajniti'<sup>3</sup> can be attributed to the important role played by political parties in the recruitment of women.

Political parties are the first 'filter points' which either helps or hinders in producing political outcomes for women. The reluctance of political parties, across the world, to recruit women has been widely studied (Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Hassim and Goetz 2003; Sawer, 2010). Apart from the preferences of the electorate and the type of regime, political parties exercise significant impact as they initially select and subsequently support candidates (Kunowich and Paxton, 2005: 512). The aversion of political parties to women's political recruitment is marked especially within the First-Past-The-Post System as it encourages the distribution of tickets to 'lowest common denominator candidates .... these rarely turn out to be women or minorities' (Reynolds, 1999: 555).

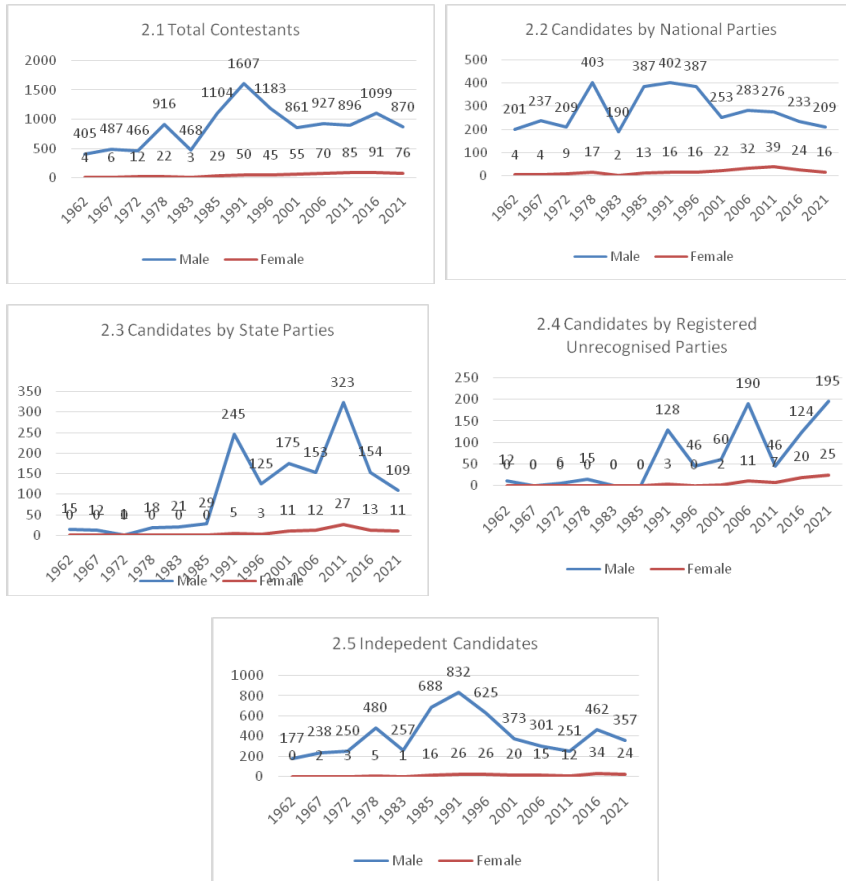
In Assam as well, political parties tend to favour the recruitment of men as Figure 2 (below) shows. Across the thirteen Assembly elections, maximum number of women candidates contested under National Parties or as Independents. State Parties and Registered Unrecognised Parties have a poorer record. The maximum number of women contestants were seen in the elections of 2016. The lowest number of women contestants were seen in the 1983 election which had two candidates from National Parties and one running as Independent. Barring four elections (1985, 1991, 1996, 2016), more women candidates have contested elections under National Parties than as Independents. Though on a cursory sight this may appear to be an extremely encouraging picture, when seen against the number of male candidates who are fielded

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<sup>3</sup> M. Banerjee (2022) uses 'Rajniti' to refer to institutional democracy and 'Lokniti' to democratic culture.

by the National Parties, the situation appears dismal. The highest rate of women’s recruitment by National Parties was around 4% in the year 2011. The corresponding figure for recruitment of men was 49.1% which was in 1962.

**Figure 2: Comparison Between the Total Candidates and Female Candidates Contesting Legislative Assembly Elections in Assam.**



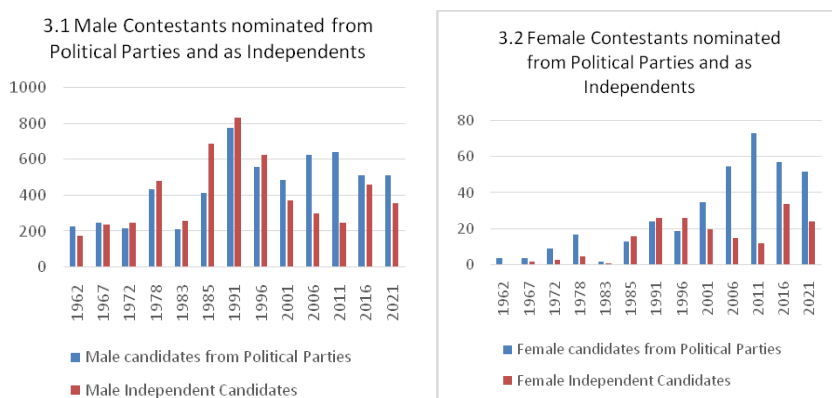
Source: Author’s own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

As far as Independents are concerned, except for 1962 and 2011, men are present in an overwhelming number. In fact, in 1985, of all the contestants 60.7% were men who were contesting as Independents. The lowest participation from men as Independents came in 2011 when they constituted 25.5% of all the contestants. Even when the categories of National, State and Registered Unrecognised Parties are combined together, in six elections (from 1972-1996)men as an Independent category dominate. In a sharp contrast, for women, except in 1985 and 1996, political parties overshadowed the Independents.

Therefore, an interesting gender pattern emerges from the data - while an overwhelming number of men are open to contesting elections as Independents, women are mostly contesting elections under the aegis of National Parties, followed by the next category of Independents. The data from Assam legislative assembly elections shows that women candidates from Assam also gravitate more towards party candidature than contesting as Independents similar to the all-India elections (Spary 2014, 2020)

The significance of political parties for women in Assam emerges even more clearly when the categories among the different political parties (National, State and Registered Unrecognised Parties) are merged. This is evident from Figure 3 (shown below) itself.

**Figure 3: Comparison Between Male and Female Candidates Nominated by Political Parties and as Independents in Legislative Assembly Elections in Assam.**

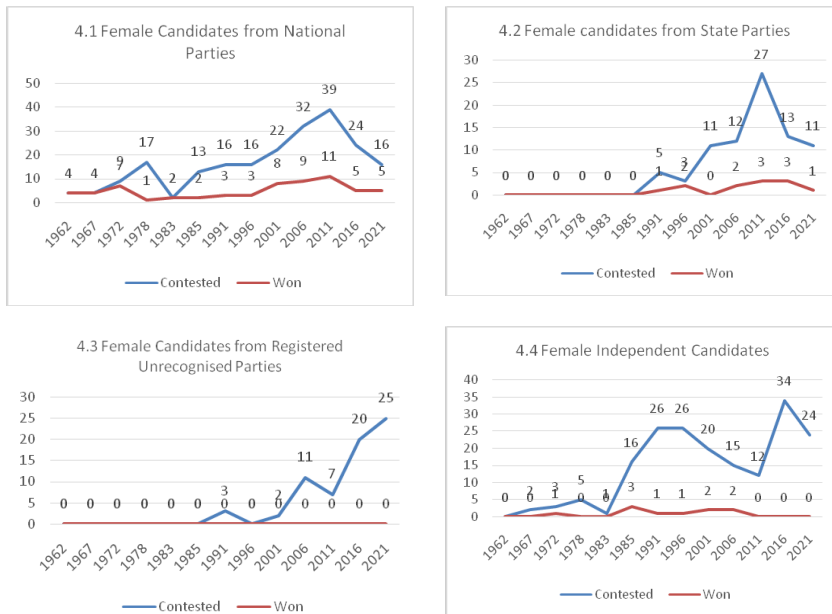


Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

Nevertheless, it is discernible that whether as candidates from discrete categories of political parties or as Independents, a huge gender gap in nominations is visible across the categories. As ‘electoral political is sandwiched between an entry gate, the political party, and an exit gate, the ballot’ (Krishnaswamy, 2022: 45), the winnability of candidates is predicated upon the recruitment from political parties. The figure below (Figure4) reveals that the chances of women candidates winning increases substantially when they are fielded by political parties rather than contesting as Independents. As can be seen, the majority of successful women contestants are from National Parties, followed by State Parties and Independents. It was only in the elections of 1985 that the number of Independent women candidates who won the elections exceeded those from the National Parties. The legislative assembly elections of 1985 were significant because it signaled the entry of Assam Gana Parishad as a formidable regional party. Pai (2013) discusses that the decade of 1980s was significant because of democratisation and increasing politicisation. It was expected that factors such as ‘improved literacy levels; decline of the Congress Party and the emergence of regional, backward caste

and Dalit-based parties; and improved levels of growth in some states' would create new spaces for women's participation (Ibid, 112).

**Figure 4: Comparison Between Different Political Parties Regarding Female Contestants and Elected.**



Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

The low winnability of Independent candidates has raised questions on their political significance. While in the general elections, Independents display 'non-existent success rate among female Independents' (Spary, 2014: 118); in the case of legislative assembly elections of Assam though it was low, success among female Independents is seen from 1972-2006. Bhattacharya (2014) notes that though the number of successful Independent candidates has decreased since the 1970s, their vote share has remained above 4% (96). Independent candidates play a strategic role in FPTP system and may also be clones for major political parties to decrease the vote share of the winning candidates (Kapoor and Magesan, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2014). However, as far as women are concerned, such conclusions are doubtful. In a situation where political parties are averse to fielding women as genuine contenders, it is doubtful if such actors will be willing to fund women as clones. Moreover, given the fact that women have lower levels of resources the number of females as Independents will continue to be low (Kittilson, 2016:12; Tambiah, 2003). In a nutshell, though political parties are biased against women's candidature they remain central to women's entry into the decision-making bodies.

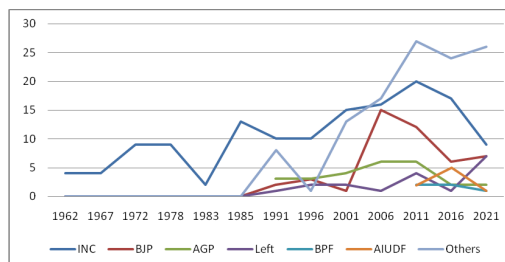


**Do All the Political Parties Treat Women Similarly?**

As seen from the section above, political parties are crucial not only because they select but also ‘are the major source of support for candidates in their bid for public office’ (Kunovich and Paxton, 2005: 512). This explain the low winnability of Independent female candidates. As far as political parties are concerned, there is divergence on how they are poised with regard to women’s political participation. For Hassim and Goetz (2003) the presence of gender responsive political parties and strong left parties help women access and participate in political competition (Ibid: 12).Ideologically, left parties are viewed as positively inclined towards women’s political participation (Hassim and Goetz, 2003; Sawer, 2010). However,in the Indian scenario, a contrary scenario is observed. Spary(2020) points out that in India the Left Parties have a weaker record of nominating women (Ibid: 4). The same trend is seen in the case of Assam Legislative Assembly elections as well. Across the thirteen elections since 1962, on an average the Left parties have consistently fielded lesser female candidates in comparison to other National Parties like Indian National Congress (henceforth INC) and Bharatiya Janta Party (henceforth BJP), State Parties like Assam Gana Parishad (henceforth AGP). In fact, in 2016, while newer entrants like All India United Democratic Front (henceforth AIUDF) and the Bodoland People’s Front (henceforth BPF) had fielded five and two candidates respectively;there was only one female contestant from the Left. In 2021, there was a positive change with seven female candidates contesting the aegis of the Left ideology which included parties like CPI, CPM, RSP, CPI(ML)(L), SUCI, RPCI (R).

As seen from Figure 5 (below), the INC has distributed the maximum number of tickets to women till 2006 when it was superseded by a combination of all the other parties (not mentioned specifically in the paper). The party fielded the maximum number of twenty female candidates in 2011, with its lowest being two in 1983. Until 2011, the party kept increasing the number of female contestants with every election, but in 2016 and 2021, it reversed the practice. In fact, it recruited only nine female contestants in 2021 which is precisely the same number of female contestantsit fielded in 1978.

**Figure 5:Female Contests Nominated by Political Parties in Legislative Assembly Elections (1962-2021).**



Source: Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

The BJP fielded two female candidates for the first time in the 1991 elections. In 2006, the party fielded the maximum number of fifteen candidates but thereafter has reduced the support to female candidates. In 2011, the number went down to twelve and thereafter to six in 2016 and marginally increased to seven in 2021.

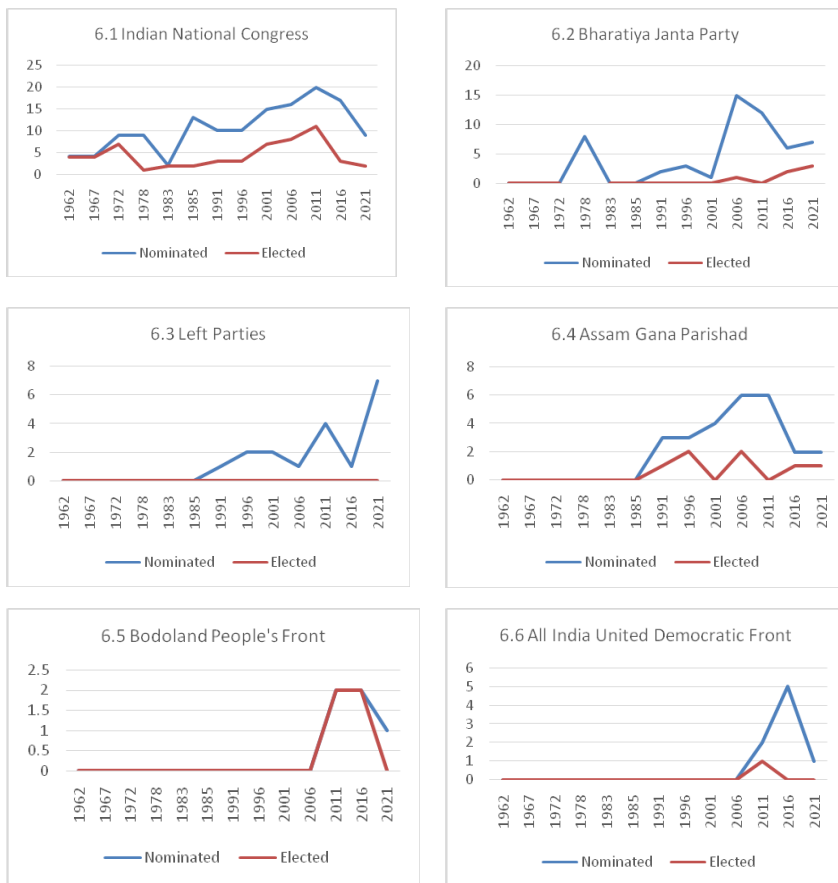
Three State Parties-AGP, BPF and AIUDF- also showed similar trend of declining support towards female candidates. The AGP, which has a longer history than the other two, fielded only two candidates in 2016 and 2021 elections as against six candidates in 2006 and 2011. The BPF also decreased its support to one candidate in 2021 from two candidates in 2016. The AIUDF drastically decreased its ticket given to women to one in 2021 as against five in 2016. As mentioned earlier, the left parties had increased the number of women contestants in 2021. This is in stark contrast to all other parties where the number of tickets distributed is on the decline.

As evident from Figure 5 (see above), all political parties display a negative trend in nominating women over the years. With the nominations decreasing, it is not surprising that the number of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly is on the decline. Though the Left increased the number of women contestants, but this did not have any electoral outcome as none of its women contestants were returned to the legislative assembly. The BJP which had fielded lesser candidates than in 2006 and 2011, was able to have the maximum number (though only three women candidates) as legislators in comparison to any other party. For the INC, in 2021 there were two successes from nine nominations. This is unlike, in 2016, when it had fielded seventeen female candidates and was able to get only three successes. The AGP nominated only two candidates, in both 2016 and 2021 and was able to have one success in both the elections. In 2011, it had nominated six women but did not have success with any of its female candidates. The BPF and AIUDF nominated women for the first time in 2011. The BPF nominated two candidates in 2011 and 2016, both of whom were elected. In 2021, however, the number of nominations decreased to one and it had no success. AIUDF which had nominated two candidates in 2011 and was able to have success with one candidate, increased its nomination to five female contestants in 2016 but was unable to win any seats. In stark contrast, in 2021 the AIUDF fielded only one female candidate in 2021 and no success was registered. The reluctance of political parties in nominating women can be attributed to its risk averse nature (Spary, 2014; Pai, 2013). Political parties tend to presume that women will be unwinnable candidates (Sanbonmatsu, 2006) and hence have lowered the number of women that they recruit for the elections. As can be seen from the Figure 6 (shown below), both national and State Parties have reduced the number of women recruited for the elections of 2021, thereby displaying a common trend of risk-aversiveness.

The decrease in the number of nominations is not just a matter of concern because it directly affects women's entry into legislative bodies but also because it is indicative of the stricter conditions that political parties may be imposing while nominating women (Spary, 2014). For instance, the INC re-nominated only six of the sixteen candidates

who fought the 2016 elections. It is significant that while two among these six had won the elections in 2016 (Nandita Das and Roselina Tirkey) and all of them were able to secure at least 37 % votes in the 2016 elections (including Angkita Dutta, Bismita Gogoi, Pallabi Gogoi and Pranati Phukon). Similarly, the BJP renominated only three female candidates among the six nominations of 2016 elections; two among these three had won the 2016 elections (Angoorlata Deka and Suman Haripriya) and the remaining one was placed second with very high votes secured (Surabhi Rajkonwar). Even the AGP used strict conditionalities by renominating only the candidate who won 2016 election from its list of two candidates (Renupoma Rajkhowa).

**Figure 6: Party-wise Comparison in Nomination and Election of Female Candidates (1962-2021).**



Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India.

Surprisingly, though the BPF had two successful female candidates in 2016, it renominated only one (Pramila Rani Brahma). The AIUDF did not renominate any of the five female contestants that it had fielded in 2016. This is even though its candidate from Chenga had stood second in 2016 (Manowara Khatun). These facts prove that political parties, both national as well as State Parties, behave similarly while recruiting women. Political parties have set the bar higher for women, with the assumption that women are most likely to lose. Thus, they re-nominated only those women who either won the previous elections or had been able to get extremely high votes despite failing to win.

In stark contrast to this trend, the INC in 2021 re-nominated eight male candidates including Gautam Roy, Rajib Lochan Pegu, Joy Prakash Das who had not performed as well as its female candidates like Monika Bora, Jonjonali Barua, Bithika Dev etc. The same bias against women is also seen from BJP. For instance, while Jabeen Barbhuyan (Goalpara West) was not re-nominated, Dr. Debamoy Sanyal (Dhubri) was even when both of them had won approximately similar vote share. The AGP also re-nominated three male candidates from the 2016 elections who had performed poorly. Thus, as far as women contestants are concerned all political parties are prone towards renominating only the strongest or the most experienced candidates. Such stringent criteria are not applied for male aspirants. This establishes the risk-averse behaviour that political parties display when it comes to women.

**Table 1: Female Candidates Fielded from Marginal and Non-Marginal Seats by Different Political Parties in 2021 Legislative Assembly Elections.**

	Non-marginal Seats	Marginal Seats
<b>BJP</b>	Nandita Garlosa (Haflong)	Angoorlata Deka (Batadroba)
	Suman Haripriya (Hajo)	Moon Swarnakar (Algapur)
		Surabhi Rajkonwar (Sibsagar)
		Hasinara Khatun (Baghbar)
		Ajanta Neog (Golaghat)
<b>INC</b>	Nandita Das (Boko)	Sibamoni Bora (Batadroba)
		Roselina Tirkey (Sarupathar)
		Bismita Gogoi (Khumtai)
		Angkita Dutta (Amguri)
		Pranati Phukan (Naharkatia)
		Pallabi Gogoi (Teok)
		Mira Borthakur Goswami (Guwahati West)
		Ashima Bordoloi (Guwahati East)
<b>AGP</b>	Renupoma Rajkhowa (Teok)	Kalpana Patowary (Sarukhetri)
<b>BPF</b>	Pramila Rani Brahma (Kokrajhar East)	

*Note: AIUDF and Left Parties are excluded as no female candidates were elected in 2016 under their party tickets. Ajanta Neog belonged to INC till 2021 when she was expelled.*

*Thereafter, she joined the BJP and won the 2021 election.*

*Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India*

Table 1 (shown above) uses Spary's (2014) classification to show the nomination patterns of women candidates for the 2021 elections by the major political parties in Assam (which were able to return female candidates in 2016 and/or 2021).

As can be seen, most of the female candidates were fielded from marginal seats, thereby compromising their chances of winnability. This establishes the fact that though political parties nominate women, they continue to be risk averse and therefore nominate women from marginal seats.

Spary(2014) introduces the factor of incumbency along the marginal/non-marginal seat distinction to predict 'winnability'. Using this schema, when the data of Assam is examined, it is found that winnability was high for Nandita Garlosa (BJP), Suman HariPriya (BJP), Nandita Das (INC), RenuPoma Rajkhowa (AGP) and Pramila Rani Brahma (BPF). This proved to be true because Pramila Rani Brahma, all the other four women won. Sibamoni Bora and Ajanta Neog, the remaining two female candidates elected to the 2021 Legislative Assembly came from marginal seats. It is noteworthy that Neog had the advantage of being the incumbent herself though she was from INC till 2021. As far as Sibamoni Bora, a first-time candidate is concerned, though she was fielded from a marginal seat, she was able to win as the incumbent was from rival party. In a nutshell, political parties nominated women mostly from marginal seats in the 2021 elections, thereby affecting their chances of winnability. In such a scenario, when women win (for instance, Sibamoni Bora for INC) it is a bonus for the party and if women do not win, no loss to the party is incurred (for instance, Moon Swanakar for BJP). In fact, all political parties appear to mirror each other as far as assignment of constituencies is concerned. Not only do they use higher standards for recruitment of women but also field women from marginal seats. Such divergence is the recruitment pattern of men and women stem from the inherent bias that permeates the upper echelons of all political parties wherein a deep-seated belief that 'women don't win' continues (Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

### **Deposit Forfeiture and Women's Prospects in Politics**

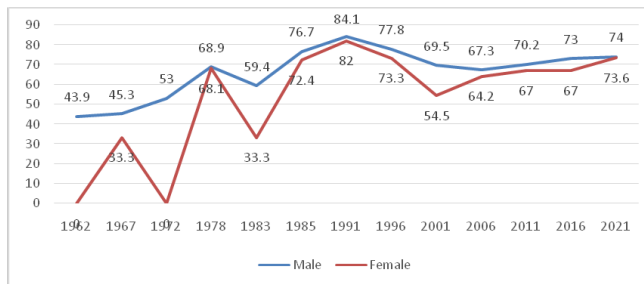
The impact of political parties on women's candidacy derives not just because it recruits, but also because it supports a candidate throughout the campaign. In a scenario where women's participation in politics is hindered by myriad factors such as poorer levels of literacy (Gleason, 2001; Chaurasia, 2022), gendered division of labour within the family (Tambiah, 2003; Gleason, 2001), absence of political networks (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013; Rai, 2017; Prillaman, 2017), low self-perception (Lawless and Fox, 2008), violence (Singh, 2017), mobility (Tambiah, 2003), incumbency (Hassim and Goetz, 2003) limited property rights (Hassim and Goetz, 2003; Tambiah, 2003),

absence of political training (Prillaman, 2017), lack of personal financial resources (Khalil and Mookerjee, 2019) and lack of access to information (Bari, 2005), political parties can buttress female aspirants to a large extent. Some of the ‘supply side factors’ that inhibit women’s entry into politics can be effectively addressed by political parties (Norris and Lovenduski, 2005; Kandawasvikas-Nhundu, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Access to funds can determine not just the chances of victory but also the nature of campaign experience (Cantrell and Ohman, 2020). In the context of India, Veniers, Sharad and Sunaad (2022) have however argued that ‘the cost of entry in politics is now so high that it erases differences of wealth between men and women MPs’ (Ibid: 15-16) but the adverse impact of campaign cost on women candidates is established by several studies (Hassim and Goetz, 2003; Maguire, 2018; Kanthak and Woon, 2015; Murray, Muriass and Wang, 2023). The challenge is encapsulated by Kanthak and Woon (2015) as ‘campaigns are at once too costly and too noisy affairs’ (Ibid: 596). Candidates entering into politics do a cost-benefit analysis and women, just like men, ‘enter when their chances of winning exceed the costs of entering’ (Cox cited in Kapoor and Magesan, 2018: 3). Apart from the hidden costs involved in campaigning, the costs of entering the electoral fray may include procedural restrictions like filling fees (in USA), educational requirement (in Pakistan), election deposits (in Japan and India) etc. While procedural entry barriers are known to affect the nature and extent of political competition (Coats and Dalton, 1991; Ansolabehere and Gerber, 1996; Hall, 2005; Afzal, 2013; Harada and Smith, 2014; Sebo, Horvath and Balazs, 2017), it produces differential results for different groups of people (Evans and Reher, 2021; Kapoor and Megesan, 2018; Faravelli, Khalil and Ponnusamy, 2022). Entry deposits, in the Indian electoral context, were envisaged to work as a procedural barrier for frivolous candidates. All candidates who are unable to secure one-sixth of the vote-share in their constituency must forfeit their deposits. The sum was fixed at Rs. 250 for reserved seats and Rs. 500 for general seats till 1996 when it was increased by twenty times to act as effective deterrent. Kapoor and Magesan (2018) show that while the increase in entry deposit disproportionately affected Independent candidates from unreserved constituencies, it did not have the same impact on Independent candidates from reserved constituencies and party backed candidates from either kind of constituencies. This is despite the fact that deposit forfeiture is only a minute fraction of campaign costs.

Similar to nominations and selections, deposit forfeiture among male and female contestants also presents a gender specific pattern. Spary (2014, 2020) notes that deposit forfeiture is highest among Independents across all years, irrespective of male or female but in 2019 more men were likely to lose deposits than women. In the case of the Assam as well, a similar pattern is seen for all the years (except 1968) where male candidates have routinely lost more deposits than female candidates.

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<sup>4</sup> Barriers on the ‘demand side’ includes the role of political parties themselves. The discriminatory treatment of the parties towards women in Assam has already been discussed in Section 1 and 2 of the present paper.

**Figure 7: Comparison Between Men and Women on the Deposits Forfeited (1962-2021)**

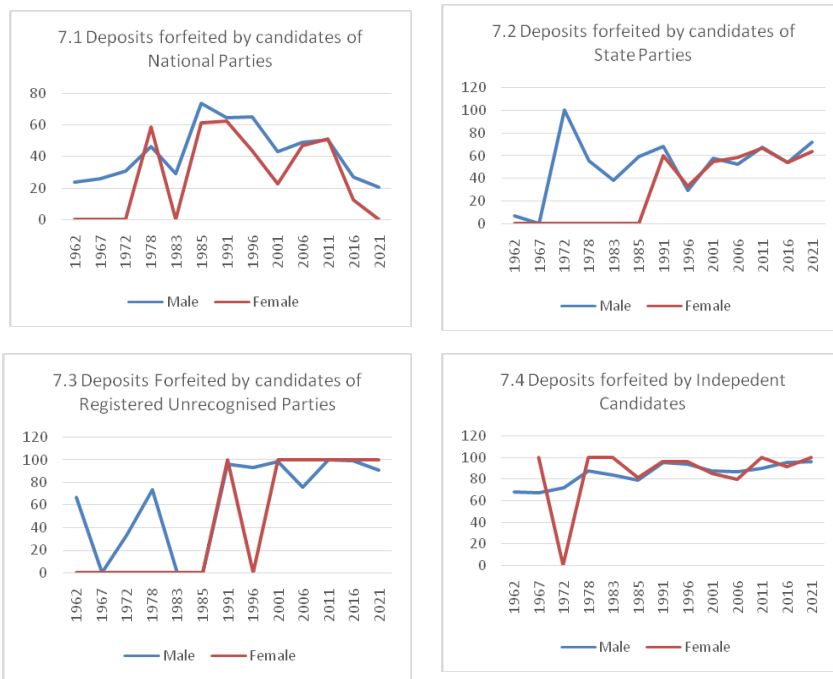
Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

A cursory look at Figure 7 shows that women candidates tend to lose lesser deposits and therefore to the interpretation that women are better at elections. This would be similar to Deshpande's (2004) optimistic assertion regarding the success rate of women candidates. However, women are lesser likely to lose their security deposit because of the strict norms of recruitment that is followed by political parties towards women.

The figure above shows there has been a decline in the forfeiture rates, both from men as well as women, from 1996 to 2006 (after which it has started to increase again). The decrease can be attributed to the rise in deposits stipulated by the Election Commission in 1996. It is worth returning to Figure 2.1 here which showed that while the number of male candidates contesting elections declined from 1996, the number of female candidates did not. Yet the increase in the entry deposit barrier had differential impacts on women and men. Even when lesser number of total candidates are losing their deposits, the consistent trend of lesser forfeiture by women contestants proves that a women contestant has crossed higher standards for being recruited.

Figure 8 provides an understanding of the nuances that exist in deposit forfeiture among the candidates from different categories. Female candidates contesting as Independents or under Registered Unrecognised Parties were the most prone to losing deposits across all the elections. For the State Parties, except in 1996 and 2006, women have lost lesser deposits than men. It is within the National Parties that women have the least chances of losing their deposits. Except in 1978, women contesting from National Parties have lost lesser deposits than men. The similar trend for National and State Parties proves the centrality of established political parties in ensuring electoral success for successfully recruiting women. At the same time, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the entry-gates of these political parties are rigidly monitored for women. The low forfeiture trends also substantiate the argument that National and State Parties are more cautious while recruiting women than Registered Unrecognised Parties. However, within the emergent party system the relevance of Registered Unrecognised Parties and Independent candidates is being increasingly questioned (Suri, 2005; Abbas, 2019; Chhibber and Verma, 2019).

**Figure 8: Comparison Between Different Categories of Political Parties Regarding Deposit Forfeiture Between Male and Female Contestants (in %)**



Source: Author’s own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India

Though women are less likely than men to lose their deposits yet as Faravelli, Khalil and Ponnusamy (2022) show women are more likely to quit elections than men when their deposits are forfeited (3). Further, for those few women who persist in the next elections, they are likely to be fielded by a different political party- one which has a lower popularity- as the previous party is likely to deny a second chance to female forfeiters. They show that a similar case is not observed for men. This is because ‘male dominated parties exclude Indian women from the political process and are risk averse with female candidate nominations’ (Ibid: 33)

In the case of the Assam, it was seen that none of three women nominated from National Parties who lost their deposits in 2016 were re-nominated by any party in 2021. Similarly, none of the four women candidates from State Parties who lost their deposits in 2016 were re-nominated by any party in 2021. Of the total 90 women who forfeited their deposits in 2016, only six re-contested the elections in 2021. Of these six, Saheba Ahmed (Naoboicha constituency) fought as Independent in both the elections from the same constituency, while Swarnalata Chaliha (Panery) and Paheswari Barua (Sipajhar) were re-nominated by the same registered unrecognised



party from the same constituency. Though Bapi Aich was renominated by the same Registered Unrecognised Party, her constituency changed (from Jalukbari in 2016 to Guwahati East in 2021). Rijumoni Gogoi (Dispur) and Juri Mali (Palasbari) who had contested from Registered Unrecognised Parties in 2016 and lost their deposits, fought the 2021 elections as Independent candidates. In a nutshell, forfeiture of deposits is not simply a monetary barrier for women aspirants in politics but more importantly, used by political parties as a barrier for future recruitment.

### **‘Formidable Candidates’: Candidate Familiarity and Kinship Networking**

Since all female candidates who fought the elections as either Independents or from Registered Unrecognised Parties in 2021 lost their deposit, only a mere number of twenty candidates (out of seventy-six) remain who can be studied as ‘non-frivolous’ candidates. The growing centrality of National and State Parties for women’s candidature (as discussed in first section of the present paper) is also seen when out of these twenty candidates, sixteen were nominated from National Parties, while four were nominated from State Parties. As far as women contestants are concerned, the legislative assembly elections of 2021 were interesting on three counts: first, in two constituencies (Teok and Batadroba) women emerged as the winner as well as the first runners-up; second, in three constituencies (Haflong, Algapur and Sarukhetri) male contestants of 2016 were replaced by female contestants in 2021 and; third, four times legislator Ajanta Neog (from Golaghat) who was expelled from INC and she was nominated by the BJP. It is noteworthy that of the six candidates who won the elections in 2021, only two were new entrants (Sibamoni Bora of INC and Nandita Garlosa of BJP) while the other four were incumbents (Suman Haripriya of BJP, Ajanta Neog of BJP, Nandita Das of INC and Renupoma Rajkhowa of AGP). Thus, this sits comfortable with Spary’s (2019) formulation that the probability of the incumbents winning increases was not only because of the nature of the seat from where they are contesting but also due to the level of familiarity that candidates enjoy in their constituencies.

Using Spary’s model of candidate familiarity (2014), when the nominations for the 2021 assembly elections are examined it emerges that the most parties tend to nominate female candidates from Categories A and B where the party has reasonable chances of winning.

Table 2 shows that Moon Swarnakar of BJP and contested from Algapur is the only candidate from Category C. Swarnakar is, however, not a newcomer to politics. She had earlier fought the elections of 2011 with AGP nomination but from Ratahbari. Though constituency familiarity is an important indicator for electoral success, kinship is also emerges as an important feature among candidates under Categories A and B. Of the nineteen candidates from Categories A and B, eleven have kinship networks available for significance of kinship networks in determining chances of electoral success becomes even more apparent when the data is narrowed down to include only those women who were finally elected to the Legislative Assembly. From among the six women elected in 2021, only Nandita Das from INC has no kins preceding her in

politics. In fact, both the new entrants into the Assam Legislative Assembly (Nandita Garlosa from BJP and Sibamoni Bora from INC) both benefit from belonging to politically networked kinship.

**Table 2: Candidate Familiarity and Party Nominations of Female Contestants in 2021 Legislative Assembly Elections.**

	Category A	Category B	Category C
<b>BJP</b>	Angoorlata Deka	Nandita Garlosa	Moon Swarnakar
	Suman Haripriya	Hasinara Khatun	
	Surabhi Rajkonwar		
	Ajanta Neog*		
<b>INC</b>	Roselina Tirkey	Sibamoni Bora	
	Nandita Das	Mira Borthakur Goswami	
	Bismita Gogoi	Ashima Bordoloi	
	Angkita Dutta		
	Pranati Phukon		
	Pallabi Gogoi		
<b>AGP</b>	Renupoma Rajkhowa	Kalpana Patowary	
<b>AIUDF</b>		Minakshi Rahman	
<b>BPF</b>	Pramila Rani Brahma		

\* *Ajanta Neog contested from INC in 2016 elections, but in 2021 shifted to BJP. Though her constituency remained the same for both the elections.*

*Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India*

Women's recruitment into leadership positions in politics has been classified differently by different scholars (Tambiah, 2003; Hassim and Goetz, 2003; Spary, 2007; Deshpande, 2009; Pai, 2013; Spary, 2014; Basu, 2016). 'Insiders' refers to those who follow the 'institutional ladder path' and therefore are recruited through a 'bottoms-up' method. The path of 'institutional ladder' is the one 'which provides long-term exposure to male-oriented political organisations – demonstrates how structural gender bias can impede the career progression of women' (Spary, 2007: 256) and therefore the number of women in this category is extremely limited (Surabhi Rajkonwar, Nandita Das, Pramila Rani Brahma, Hasinara Khatun, Mira Borthakur Goswami and Minakshi Rahman). Kinship networks is the most popular pathways to power for female candidates has been kinship networking. This is not a just a feature peculiar to Assam but is a phenomenon that is seen in the All-India as well as the South and Southeast Asian context (Basu, 2016; Skoda, 2004; Tambiah, 2003; Wardani and Subetki, 2021). These 'outsiders' are 'surrogates' who enter through 'top-down' measures (Spary, 2007; D' Amicio, 1995; Pai, 2013). Another path for entering politics, discussed by Spary and mainly seen in Southern states, has been as a 'culture hero'. Within the context of Assam, the recruitment of Angoorlata Deka by

BJP (since 2016) and Kalpana Patowary by AGP seem to follow this route. Pai explains that though family connections enable a large number of women to enter politics, it may not ensure ascent in politics (2013). The presence of women as ‘proxy’ for men have been widely studied not just from the purview of grassroots politics but also at the national level (Pai, 1998; Singh, 2000; Buch, 2010; Pai, 2013).

Pai (2013) and Spary (2014) argue that in contexts where political parties display risk aversiveness towards women, there is utility in relying upon kinship networks. Basu (2016) argues that kinship ties off-set three entry barriers that are posed for female contestants:

1. The deterrent effect of the increasing violence and criminalization of politics, from which dynastic women may be better protected;
2. A bias against women in the organizational structures of political parties; and
3. The absence of reservations in both national and state legislatures (Ibid: 151).

Political parties are inclined to recruit from existing political kinship networks mainly because of three reasons: first, informational advantages that come when dynastic candidates are nominated, second, dynastic families are able to provide necessary financial support and third, a network of loyal supporters who work at the grassroots becomes available (Wardani and Subetki, 2021; Basu, 2016). ‘Brand name recognition’, therefore, emerges as an important consideration for political parties when recruitment of women contestants take place (Basu, 2016: 149). This would explain not just the nomination but also the subsequent victory of Nandita Garlosa and Sibamoni Bora. Similarly, the renomination of Roselina Tirkey, Angkita Dutta, Bismita Gogoi and Pranati Phukon is not just because they were able to secure at least 37 % votes in the 2016 elections but also because of the pragmatic advantages that accrues from nominating women with kinship networks. In brief, women are seen as formidable contestants not only when they are able to cross a higher threshold but also when they come from families that are already entrenched in politics.

**Table 3: Party Nominations from Marginal and Non-Marginal Seats and the Availability of Kinship Networks Among Female Contestants in 2021 Legislative Assembly Elections.**

	<b>Kinship Networks Available</b>	<b>No Kinship Networks Available</b>
<b>Marginal Seats</b>	Sibamoni Bora Roselina Tirkey Bismita Gogoi Angkita Dutta Pranati Phukon Pallavi Gogoi Ashima Bordoloi	Angoorlata Deka Moon Swarnakar Surabhi Rajkonwar Hasinara Khatun Mira Bothakur Goswami Kalpana Patowary Minakshi Rahman
<b>Non-Marginal Seats</b>	Nandita Garlosa Suman Haripriya Ajanta Neog Renupoma Rajkhowa	Nandita Das Pramila Rani Brahma

*Source: Author's own. Data compiled by author based on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India*

As can be seen from Table 3, all women in non-marginal seats who have kinship networks available were able to win the 2021 elections. While it is not necessary that all female candidates who have availability of kinship networks will be nominated from non-marginal seats, all those nominated from non-marginal seats are extremely likely to have kinship networks available. This facilitates a smooth electoral victory. Women need to use the family 'brand-name' as their skills and attainments are not adequately respected (Basu, 2016: 151). Political parties 'tend to look for candidates who have strong grassroots networks and appeal at the local level' (Wardani and Subetki, 2021: 44) instead of institutional climbers as 'local dynasties are... often able to build lasting political loyalties at the grassroots, making their candidates formidable competitors' (Wardani and Subetki, 2021: 43). Basu (2016) explains that in a context where the opportunity structure for women is inherently circumscribed, women's dependence on kinship association must be seen as an antidote to discrimination by political parties (Ibid: 151)

However, Hassim and Goetz (2003) cautions that such paths of entry 'may favour individual women but does not generally facilitate a long-term increase in the total number of women active in conventional politics' (Waylen cited in Hassim and Goetz, 55). The growing importance of dynastic succession and the narrowing of the institutional path to power happens at almost the same time (Wardani and Subetki, 2021: 29) which affects female candidates who may not have won the elections but could secure substantial votes (like Jabeen Barbhuiyan of BJP, Anurupa Hannan of INC and Manowara Khatun of AIUDF who were not re-nominated by their respective parties in 2021 despite their commendable performance in 2016). Notably, as Table 3 shows the group of contestants who are fielded from marginal seats and have no kinship networks available are the least formidable candidates within this opportunity structure.

## Conclusion

As far as country-wise performance on SDG Target 5.5 (ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life) is concerned, Assam ranks 19th among the different states of India. By using data from the thirteen legislative assembly elections, it was seen that women's representation in Assam's legislative Assembly presents a dismal picture. The situation is unlikely to change till political parties continue to be negative gatekeepers for women candidates. It is in this context that the UN Resolution on Women and Political Participation (2011) which states that political parties must be encouraged 'to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women' becomes important (cited in Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2021: 1). However, as the study shows, not only do political parties nominate lesser number of women in comparison to men but also use differing criteria while recruiting them. As the women are recruited with higher standards, not only do a higher proportion of women contesting elections appear to win the elections but also the forfeiture of deposits among women is also lesser. The inevitability of

political parties for ensuring higher participation of women, especially National Parties, can be implied from the almost negligible electoral success of women contesting as Independents and those nominated from Registered Unrecognised Parties. The high rate of deposit forfeiture among these two categories also shows that any effort to increase women's political representation must pass through the corridors of National Parties.

Though women's entry to politics can also happen through alternative routes, such as participation in social movements and through support from non-governmental organisations; such routes are couched with additional difficulties as elections require sustained assistance, including financial and grassroots supporters. Therefore, political parties continue to play an important role in the electoral process. Especially, in a context where gender quotas are unavailable, a sustained examination of the role of political parties in facilitating women's entry into politics is extremely necessary. The case of Assam is particularly important as the state had reserved one-half of the seats for women in local governance. This makes available a substantial number of women trained in electoral politics but there is no forward linkage available for them. Using Spary's model, this paper is able to show the reluctance of political parties in recruiting women. Despite the huge number of women leaders at the grassroots, political parties continue to work with the perception that women candidates may compromise the electoral victory of the party. The present paper was an attempt to engage with the question of women's descriptive representative in Assam, based on election data from 1962 to 2021, though the focus is mainly on 2016 and 2021 when it deals with the question of constituency familiarity of female candidates. The paper also explores the advantages that kinship networks provide to women in the context of narrow opportunities that political parties provide. However, as the paper is based exclusively on quantitative data from one state only, caution must be exercised in generalising the findings of this paper. Future research around the question of women's recruitment and legislative politics using in-depth interviews can enrich the field further. Moreover, comparative studies across different states using Spary's framework would also generate further insights into the field of gender and electoral politics. An extremely important point that emerges from the study is that though women may contest elections as Independents or under Registered Unrecognised Parties, the possibility of their winning is extremely circumscribed. In light of this, it would be worthwhile for future research to probe the motivation of all such candidates who decide to enter into the electoral fray knowing well that the space is inherently constrained. Moreover, studies on gender and political participation can generate important insights when the organisational structure of political parties, especially the role of women's wings is studied, particularly if and when can the women's wings work as feeders for women's recruitment into the electoral fray. Apart from the question of women's political recruitment, an important area for future research can also be the examination of manifestoes by political parties. Considering that all political parties avow to support women's entry into politics and women's issues, such studies can complement the present effort to demonstrate how political parties continue to act as negative gatekeepers for female candidates.

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