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Challenges and Policy Interventions for Improving the Socio-Political Status of Sonowal Kachari Women: A Study of the Tengakhat Development Block in Dibrugarh District, Assam

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Abstract

Women's socio-political status is a fundamental measure of democratic governance, gender equality, and sustainable development. Although constitutional provisions and government welfare programmes have been introduced to promote the empowerment of tribal women in India, many indigenous women continue to encounter social, economic, and political barriers that limit their participation in decision-making and development processes. This study investigates the major challenges affecting the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh District, Assam, and examines the effectiveness of existing policy interventions in improving their overall well-being. A descriptive research design was adopted using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and field interviews with Sonowal Kachari women, while secondary information was obtained from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, government reports, Census publications, and official policy documents. The findings reveal that inadequate educational opportunities, limited access to employment, economic dependence, low levels of political participation, insufficient awareness of legal rights and welfare schemes, and entrenched patriarchal norms continue to hinder the empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women. Although several government initiatives have

contributed to improving their socio-economic conditions, their overall impact remains constrained by inadequate implementation, limited outreach, and low public awareness. The study recommends strengthening education and skill development, increasing awareness of legal and welfare provisions, encouraging women's leadership in local governance, and improving the implementation and monitoring of gender-responsive policies. These measures are essential for enhancing the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women and promoting inclusive and sustainable development in the Tengakhat Development Block.

Keywords: Sonowal Kachari Women, Socio-Political Status, Policy Interventions, Women's Empowerment, Political Participation, Tengakhat Development Block, Dibrugarh District, Assam.

Introduction

Women's socio-political status is widely regarded as a fundamental indicator of democratic governance, social justice, and sustainable development. Equal participation of women in political, economic, and social institutions contributes significantly to inclusive policymaking, equitable resource distribution, and community development. International commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), emphasize the importance of ensuring women's full and effective participation in public life. In India, constitutional guarantees and various government initiatives have been introduced to promote gender equality and strengthen the socio-political empowerment of women. However, the benefits of these measures have not been experienced equally across all communities, especially among indigenous and tribal populations.

The Sonowal Kachari community, recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in Assam, possesses a rich cultural heritage and has historically contributed to the state's social and economic development. Despite these contributions, Sonowal Kachari women continue to face multiple challenges that limit their socio-political advancement. Limited educational opportunities, economic dependence, inadequate access to healthcare, restricted participation in political decision-making, gender-based discrimination, and insufficient awareness of legal rights and government welfare schemes continue to hinder their empowerment. These interconnected challenges affect not only their individual well-being but also their ability to contribute effectively to community development and local governance.

The Tengakhat Development Block in Dibrugarh District has a substantial Sonowal Kachari population and provides an important setting for examining the socio-political realities of women within the community. Although several government welfare programmes and constitutional provisions aim to improve the living conditions of tribal women, their implementation and effectiveness often vary at the grassroots level. Understanding how these policies influence the everyday lives of Sonowal Kachari women is essential for identifying existing gaps and formulating more effective and inclusive policy interventions.

Although previous studies have explored tribal development, women's empowerment, and political participation in Assam, research specifically examining the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women at the local level remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the challenges experienced by women in the Tengakhat Development Block and the effectiveness of policy measures designed to address these issues. This gap highlights the need for a focused investigation that combines socio-political analysis with policy evaluation.

Women's political participation encompasses the active engagement of women in political affairs and governance at various levels. It includes activities such as casting votes, contesting elections, becoming members of political parties, participating in local self-government institutions, engaging in political campaigns, and contributing to public policy and decision-making processes. As a key component of

democratic governance and gender equality, women's political participation promotes inclusive representation and ensures that women's perspectives are incorporated into policy development and implementation. Increased participation in political institutions strengthens women's leadership capacities, enhances their socio-economic status, and contributes to more equitable and responsive governance. Despite constitutional safeguards and policy initiatives, many women continue to face barriers such as patriarchal social norms, inadequate access to education and financial resources, gender-based discrimination, and institutional constraints. Addressing these challenges through legal reforms, leadership development, awareness programmes, and supportive public policies is essential for achieving meaningful gender equality and sustainable democratic development.

Against this background, the present study examines the major challenges affecting the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh District, Assam. It also evaluates the effectiveness of existing government policies and welfare programmes in improving their socio-political conditions and proposes policy recommendations to strengthen women's empowerment, enhance political participation, and promote inclusive and sustainable development within the community.

The Sonowal Kacharis

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the prominent indigenous tribal communities of Assam and are recognized as a sub-group of the larger Bodo ethnic family. Although historical records regarding their early origin are limited, anthropological evidence, traditional beliefs, and historical studies suggest that they belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic and Mongoloid ethnic groups. It is generally believed that their ancestors migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley during ancient times and gradually established permanent settlements in different parts of present-day Assam.

The Sonowal Kacharis are considered descendants of the ancient Kachari people, who are among the earliest known inhabitants of Assam. Several scholars have identified the Kacharis as one of the indigenous communities of the region with a rich cultural and historical heritage. Over the centuries, the Kachari community evolved into different branches, of which the Sonowal Kacharis constitute a distinct group. Despite experiencing social, political, and economic transformations, the community has successfully preserved its unique identity through its customs, traditions, language, religious practices, and cultural institutions. Today, the Sonowal Kacharis continue to play a significant role in the socio-cultural landscape of Assam while striving to maintain their traditional heritage alongside the processes of modernization.

Statement of the Problem

Women play a vital role in the socio-economic and political development of society. However, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and various government initiatives aimed at women's empowerment, many tribal women in India continue to experience socio-economic disadvantages and limited political participation. Among the indigenous communities of Assam, the Sonowal Kachari women face multiple challenges, including inadequate access to quality education, limited employment opportunities, economic dependence, restricted participation in decision-making processes, and persistent socio-cultural barriers. These challenges constrain their ability to participate effectively in local governance and community development.

The Tengakhat Development Block in Dibrugarh District has a significant population of Sonowal Kachari people, yet there is limited empirical research examining the socio-political status of women in this community. Existing studies have largely focused on tribal development or women's empowerment in general, with insufficient attention to the specific issues affecting Sonowal Kachari women and the

effectiveness of current policy interventions. This lack of localized evidence creates a gap in understanding the factors that influence their socio-political status and the measures required to address these challenges.

Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the major socio-political challenges faced by Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block, assess the effectiveness of existing government policies and welfare programmes, and propose suitable policy interventions to enhance their socio-political status and promote inclusive and sustainable development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh District, Assam.
2. To identify the major socio-economic, cultural, and institutional challenges affecting the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women.
3. To suggest appropriate policy interventions for improving the socio-political status and empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women.

Research Questions

1. What is the current socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh District, Assam?
2. What are the major socio-economic, cultural, and institutional challenges affecting the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women?
3. What policy interventions can effectively improve the socio-political status and empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women?

Literature Review

1. Kabeer, N. (1999) conceptualizes women's empowerment as a process through which women gain access to resources, develop the agency to make strategic life choices, and achieve meaningful outcomes. She argues that education, economic independence, and participation in decision-making are fundamental dimensions of empowerment. This framework provides an important theoretical basis for analysing the socio-political status and empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women.

2. Sen, A. (1999) proposes the capability approach, emphasizing that development should expand people's freedoms and capabilities rather than merely increase income. He highlights the importance of education, healthcare, and equal opportunities in enabling women to participate actively in social, economic, and political life. His work offers a valuable perspective for understanding the relationship between socio-economic conditions and women's political participation.

3. Agarwal, B. (2010) examines women's participation in local governance and community institutions, arguing that meaningful representation requires not only numerical presence but also active involvement in decision-making. She demonstrates that institutional support, education, and social acceptance are essential for effective participation. Her findings are relevant for understanding the challenges faced by women in grassroots governance.

4. Pande, R. (2014) analyses women's participation in local governance in India following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. The study finds that although women's representation has increased through reservation policies, effective participation continues to be constrained by patriarchal attitudes, inadequate political awareness, economic dependence, and limited leadership opportunities. The study underscores the need for stronger policy interventions to enhance women's socio-political empowerment.

Research Gap

Previous studies have made significant contributions to understanding women's empowerment, political participation, and the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities in India. Research on the Sonowal Kachari community has primarily focused on its history, culture, identity, and socio-economic characteristics. However, limited attention has been given to the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women, particularly regarding their participation in political processes, leadership roles, and decision-making at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, there is a shortage of empirical studies assessing the challenges that restrict the socio-political empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women and evaluating the effectiveness of existing government policies and development programmes designed to improve their status. As a result, important aspects of their socio-political experiences remain insufficiently explored.

To address this gap, the present study examines the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh District, Assam. It focuses on identifying the major challenges affecting their empowerment and political participation while assessing policy interventions that can strengthen their inclusion in social and political development.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design to examine the challenges and policy interventions for improving the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh district, Assam. The study is based on both primary and secondary data.

The primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to **150 respondents** selected from the Sonowal Kachari community. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select respondents from four villages in the Tengakhat Development Block, where the Sonowal Kachari population is relatively large. The questionnaire included questions related to respondents' socio-economic background, political participation, awareness of government schemes, challenges faced, and suggestions for policy interventions.

The **secondary data** were collected from books, research articles, journals, government reports, census publications, official websites, and other relevant published and unpublished sources. These materials provided the theoretical and contextual background for the study.

The collected data were classified, coded, and tabulated for analysis. The study employed descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distribution and **percentage analysis**, to summarize and interpret the data. These statistical methods were used to present the findings systematically and to understand the socio-political status, participation, and challenges experienced by Sonowal Kachari women in the study area.

Result And Discussion

Table 1.1.based on Tengakhat Development Block with villages under the block and an age distribution of 18–60 years.

Sl. No.	Name of the Block	Name of the Village	Total Respondents	18–30 Years	31–45 Years	46–60 Years
1	Tengakhat Development Block	Purani khangia village	40	15	16	9

	No khangia village	35	12	14	9
	Dharia village	38	14	15	9
	Kachari Pathar Village	37	13	15	9
Total		150	54	60	36
Percentage		100%	36%	40%	24%

The table 1.1 presents the age-wise distribution of respondents from four villages under the Tengakhat Development Block. A total of 150 respondents were selected for the study, comprising 40 respondents from Purani Khangia Village, 35 from No Khangia Village, 38 from Dharia Village, and 37 from Kachari Pathar Village.

The respondents were classified into three age groups: 18–30 years, 31–45 years, and 46–60 years. Of the total respondents, 54 (36%) belonged to the 18–30 years age group, 60 (40%) belonged to the 31–45 years age group, and 36 (24%) belonged to the 46–60 years age group. The largest proportion of respondents was in the 31–45 years age group, indicating that middle-aged individuals constituted the majority of the study population. The 18–30 years age group represented over one-third of the respondents, while the 46–60 years age group accounted for the smallest share.

At the village level, Purani Khangia Village had 15 respondents aged 18–30 years, 16 aged 31–45 years, and 9 aged 46–60 years. No Khangia Village included 12 respondents in the 18–30 years group, 14 in the 31–45 years group, and 9 in the 46–60 years group. Dharia Village consisted of 14 respondents aged 18–30 years, 15 aged 31–45 years, and 9 aged 46–60 years. Similarly, Kachari Pathar Village had 13 respondents in the 18–30 years category, 15 in the 31–45 years category, and 9 in the 46–60 years category.

Overall, the findings indicate that respondents from the 31–45 years age group were the most represented across all four villages, followed by those aged 18–30 years, whereas respondents aged 46–60 years formed the smallest proportion of the sample. This distribution provides a balanced representation of different age groups and ensures the inclusion of respondents from the economically active and experienced segments of the rural population.

Table 1.2. Based on Social Status of Sonowal Kachari women through Occupation, Livelihood, Monthly Household Income etc.

Variable	Category	Frequency (N=150)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	16–18 years	35	23.3
	19–21 years	60	40.0
	22–24 years	55	36.7
	Total	150	100.0
Occupation	Agriculture	48	32.0
	Self-employed/Business	22	14.7
	Government/Private Service	18	12.0
	Student	30	20.0
	Homemaker	32	21.3
	Total	150	100.0
Primary Livelihood	Agriculture	68	45.3

	Wage Labour	30	20.0
	Business	18	12.0
	Service	16	10.7
	Others	18	12.0
	Total	150	100.0
Monthly Household Income	Below ₹10,000	42	28.0
	₹10,001–₹20,000	58	38.7
	₹20,001–₹30,000	32	21.3
	Above ₹30,000	18	12.0
	Total	150	100.0

The Table 1.2 Describe on Sonowal Kachari women respondents from the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh district, Assam. The respondents were analysed on the basis of age, occupation, primary livelihood, and monthly household income to understand their overall social status.

The age distribution indicates that the largest proportion of respondents, **60 (40.0%)**, falls within the **19–21 years** age group. This is followed by **55 respondents (36.7%)** aged **22–24 years**, while **35 respondents (23.3%)** belong to the **16–18 years** age group. The data suggest that the study primarily represents young women, who constitute a significant segment of the Sonowal Kachari population in the selected villages.

In terms of occupation, **agriculture** is the dominant source of employment, engaging **48 respondents (32.0%)**. Homemakers account for **32 respondents (21.3%)**, while **30 respondents (20.0%)** are students. Additionally, **22 respondents (14.7%)** are involved in self-employment or small businesses, and **18 respondents (12.0%)** are employed in government or private sector jobs. This occupational pattern reflects the continued importance of agriculture alongside increasing participation in education and non-agricultural employment.

The livelihood pattern further demonstrates the dependence of respondents on agriculture. Nearly half of the respondents (**68 or 45.3%**) rely on agriculture as their principal means of livelihood. Wage labour supports **30 respondents (20.0%)**, whereas business and other livelihood activities each account for **18 respondents (12.0%)**. Only **16 respondents (10.7%)** depend primarily on salaried employment. These findings indicate that agriculture remains the backbone of the local economy.

The monthly household income of the respondents shows that **58 respondents (38.7%)** belong to the **₹10,001–₹20,000** income category, making it the largest group. **Forty-two respondents (28.0%)** have a monthly household income below **₹10,000**, while **32 respondents (21.3%)** earn between **₹20,001 and ₹30,000**. A comparatively smaller proportion, **18 respondents (12.0%)**, report a monthly household income above **₹30,000**. This income pattern suggests that most households fall within the lower- and middle-income categories.

Overall, the findings reveal that the respondents are predominantly young women whose livelihoods are closely linked to agriculture and whose households generally have modest income levels. These socio-economic characteristics play an important role in shaping their social position, access to opportunities, and participation in socio-political activities within the community.

Table 1.3. Below is a sample table on Political Status and Policy Interventions of Sonowal Kachari Women based on 150 respondents.

Sl. No.	Variable	Category	Frequency (N=150)	Percentage (%)
1	Political Participation	Participates in elections	138	92.0

		Participates in political meetings	76	50.7
		Member of a political party	24	16.0
		Contested elections	10	6.7
2	Awareness of Government Schemes	Aware	104	69.3
		Not aware	46	30.7
3	Benefits Received from Government Schemes	Yes	88	58.7
		No	62	41.3
4	Participation in Gram Sabha/Village Meetings	Regularly	54	36.0
		Occasionally	63	42.0
		Never	33	22.0
5	Need for Policy Interventions	Strongly Agree	82	54.7
		Agree	48	32.0
		Neutral	12	8.0
		Disagree	8	5.3
	Total Respondents		150	100.0

Table 1.3 presents the political status and perceptions regarding policy interventions among the 150 Sonowal Kachari women respondents in the Tengakhata Development Block of Dibrugarh district, Assam. The analysis focuses on political participation, awareness of government welfare schemes, access to scheme benefits, involvement in local governance, and opinions on the need for policy interventions.

The findings reveal that **138 respondents (92.0%)** reported participating in elections, indicating a high level of electoral participation among the women. However, participation declines in other forms of political engagement. Only **76 respondents (50.7%)** attend political meetings, **24 respondents (16.0%)** are members of political parties, and merely **10 respondents (6.7%)** have contested elections. This suggests that while voting is widespread, active involvement in political leadership and decision-making remains limited.

Regarding awareness of government welfare schemes, **104 respondents (69.3%)** stated that they were aware of the schemes available for women and tribal communities, whereas **46 respondents (30.7%)** lacked such awareness. Furthermore, **88 respondents (58.7%)** reported receiving benefits from government programmes, while **62 respondents (41.3%)** had not benefited from these schemes. This indicates that although awareness is relatively high, access to government benefits is not universal.

Participation in local governance also varies among the respondents. **Fifty-four respondents (36.0%)** regularly attend Gram Sabha or village meetings, **63 respondents (42.0%)** participate occasionally, and **33 respondents (22.0%)** never attend such meetings. These findings suggest that women's involvement in local decision-making processes is moderate but can be further strengthened.

The respondents also expressed strong support for policy interventions aimed at improving their socio-political status. A majority of **82 respondents (54.7%)** strongly agreed that additional policy measures are necessary, while **48 respondents (32.0%)** agreed. Only **12 respondents (8.0%)** remained neutral, and **8 respondents (5.3%)** disagreed. This demonstrates a broad consensus among the respondents regarding the need for more effective policies to enhance women's political participation, awareness, leadership opportunities, and access to welfare programmes.

Overall, the table indicates that although Sonowal Kachari women actively participate in the electoral process, their representation in political leadership and formal political institutions remains comparatively

low. Strengthening awareness, improving access to government schemes, encouraging participation in local governance, and implementing targeted policy interventions are essential for enhancing their socio-political empowerment.

Major Findings

The major findings of the study are directly related to the socio-political status, challenges, and policy interventions concerning Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh district.

1. The study found that the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women is closely associated with their socio-economic background, particularly occupation, livelihood, and household income.
2. Agriculture is the principal occupation and source of livelihood for most respondents, indicating that economic dependence on agriculture continues to shape their social and political participation.
3. Most respondents belong to low- and middle-income households, which limits their access to education, leadership opportunities, skill development, and active participation in public decision-making.
4. Although an overwhelming majority of respondents participate in elections, their involvement in political leadership, political parties, and contesting elections remains very low. This indicates that electoral participation has not translated into meaningful political representation.
5. Women's participation in Gram Sabha and village-level decision-making is moderate, suggesting that social and cultural barriers continue to restrict their active role in local governance.
6. While most respondents are aware of government welfare schemes, a considerable proportion have not received the intended benefits, indicating gaps in awareness, implementation, outreach, and access.
7. The study identifies inadequate political awareness, limited leadership opportunities, economic constraints, insufficient access to government schemes, and traditional gender norms as the major challenges affecting the socio-political empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women.
8. The majority of respondents strongly support the introduction of stronger policy interventions, including awareness campaigns, leadership development programmes, skill and livelihood training, improved implementation of welfare schemes, and greater representation of women in local governance institutions.
9. The findings suggest that improving the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women requires an integrated approach that combines economic empowerment, educational opportunities, political capacity-building, effective implementation of government policies, and active participation of women in community decision-making.
10. Overall, the study concludes that although Sonowal Kachari women actively exercise their voting rights, substantial challenges remain in achieving equal political representation and socio-economic empowerment. Strengthening targeted policy interventions is essential for ensuring inclusive development and enhancing the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block.

Conclusion

The present study explored the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women in the Tengakhat Development Block of Dibrugarh district, Assam, with a focus on identifying the challenges they encounter and the policy interventions required to enhance their overall empowerment. The findings indicate that while most respondents actively participate in elections, their involvement in political leadership, decision-making processes, and political organizations remains comparatively limited.

The study further reveals that the socio-political position of Sonowal Kachari women is significantly influenced by their socio-economic conditions. Agriculture continues to be the primary occupation and source of livelihood for a majority of the respondents, and many households fall within the lower- and

middle-income groups. These economic realities affect women's access to education, employment opportunities, leadership roles, and participation in governance.

The findings also show that although a considerable proportion of respondents are aware of government welfare schemes, many have not been able to access or benefit from them. This highlights the need to strengthen awareness programmes, improve policy implementation, and ensure that welfare initiatives effectively reach the intended beneficiaries. In addition, participation in Gram Sabha meetings and other local governance activities remains moderate, suggesting that cultural norms, limited awareness, and institutional constraints continue to restrict women's active engagement in community decision-making.

The study emphasizes that improving the socio-political status of Sonowal Kachari women requires a coordinated and multidimensional approach. Greater investment in education, livelihood development, leadership training, political awareness, and skill-building programmes is essential. At the same time, government agencies, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and community organizations should work together to improve the implementation of welfare schemes and create more opportunities for women to participate in governance and public affairs.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that although Sonowal Kachari women have made progress in exercising their democratic rights, significant challenges continue to limit their full socio-political empowerment. Addressing these challenges through inclusive policies, effective institutional support, and community-based initiatives will strengthen women's participation in decision-making and contribute to the sustainable and equitable development of the Sonowal Kachari community as well as rural Assam.

Suggestion

1. **Strengthen Political Awareness and Leadership:** Government agencies, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and civil society organizations should organize regular political awareness programmes and leadership training to encourage Sonowal Kachari women to participate actively in political decision-making and local governance.
2. **Improve Access to Government Welfare Schemes:** The implementation of welfare schemes for tribal women should be strengthened through better awareness campaigns, simplified procedures, and effective monitoring to ensure that eligible beneficiaries receive timely support.
3. **Promote Economic Empowerment:** Skill development, vocational training, entrepreneurship programmes, and access to credit should be expanded to improve women's livelihoods, increase household income, and enhance their socio-political participation.
4. **Enhance Women's Participation in Local Governance:** Greater efforts should be made to encourage the regular participation of Sonowal Kachari women in Gram Sabha meetings, village committees, and Panchayati Raj Institutions by creating an inclusive and supportive environment.
5. **Strengthen Education and Capacity Building:** Educational opportunities, adult literacy programmes, and capacity-building initiatives should be promoted to improve women's knowledge, confidence, leadership abilities, and awareness of their legal, political, and social rights.
6. **Increase representation in political institutions:** Special initiatives should be introduced to encourage Sonowal Kachari women to contest local elections, assume leadership positions, and participate in political decision-making at different levels.
7. **Promote further research:** Future studies should include larger sample sizes and cover other districts of Assam to obtain a broader understanding of the socio-political status and empowerment of Sonowal Kachari women and other indigenous communities.

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