



Urban local government in Mizoram: Women and political participation

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Abstract

The urban local government under the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 has not been established in Mizoram until the Mizoram Municipalities Act 2007 was enacted by the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. The first election of Aizawl Municipal Council (AMC) was conducted in 2010 as per the Mizoram Municipalities (Amendment) Act 2009. This paper briefly describes the evolution of urban local government in India and in Mizoram. To understand women's participation and representation in the AMC it highlights the electoral history of AMC and compares political parties' performance in both the reserved seats and general seats. It also highlights the municipal authority of the Executive Council and institutional mechanism of Wards Committees of the AMC where women's presence is seen to understand some aspects of women's participation towards urban local governance. This paper aims to highlight the importance of one-third seat reservation for women which increased the number of women's representation in urban local governments in Mizoram and their participation toward the elections of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly.

Keywords: Urban local government, AMC, seat reservation, women, politics.

Introduction

Modern local government in India has a long historical journey dating back to the British period. Joshi (2012) ^[2] described the evolution of modern local government in India and differentiated into four phases. Municipal bodies in the initial years have been established by the British for the maintenance of civic functions and services for which expense was designed to be borne by the local people. It was created largely out of the idea of getting native people to contribute money for provision of civic services and making them involved in local administration. In the initial phase, local government institutions were mainly confined to those larger areas having a sizable British population. In 1688 the first municipal body was established in Madras followed later by Bombay and Calcutta. However, these corporations were set up without legislative act and were non-representative bodies as its members were nominated from among non-native population. The government of India passed Act XXVI in 1850 and since then municipal bodies were established in various places in India (Joshi, 2012, pp. 14, 15) ^[2].

The second phase beginning from the viceroyalty of Lord Mayo (1869-1872) has witnessed an attempt to reform the local government with his initiative of the policy of fiscal decentralization by the Resolution of 1870. The concept of fiscal decentralization focused on putting responsibility on provincial governments for allocation of funds for education, sanitation, medical relief and public works with local taxation as the financial source of the provincial governments. Later, a more serious attempt to reform local government was made by Lord Rippon with his Resolution on Local Self-Government of 18th May, 1882. The Resolution emphasized that the role of local self-government is political education of the people and recommended the setting up of rural boards like municipal boards. Elected non-officials comprising two-thirds majority as members of boards and conducting elections in towns and countryside among others were the principles

expressed in the Resolution (Joshi, 2012, p.17) ^[2]. In 1907 the Royal Commission upon Decentralization was appointed to study the financial and administrative relations of the government of India and provincial governments. Under the Government of India Act, 1919 the subject of local government was transferred to provincial governments with the provincial ministers taking charge of local government. During the third phase which began after independence two committees were formed by the central government. The first one was the Balwantrai Mehta Committee 1957 suggested the creation of a three-tier system of democratic decentralization consisting of the village Panchayat at village level, the Panchayat Samiti at block level and the Zilla Parishad at district level. Most of the states established a three-tier panchayati raj system of local government as recommended by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. However, the principle of democratic decentralization as envisioned by the Committee was not fully realized by many states. The Ashok Mehta Committee appointed in 1977 submitted its report in 1978 and recommended a two-tier system of Panchayati Raj consisting of Zilla Parishad at the district level and Mandal Panchayat in a group of villages with a population of 15,000 to 20,000. Some states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh adopted the recommendation of the Ashok Mehta Committee and reconstituted their panchayati raj system accordingly (Joshi, 2012, pp. 21-23) ^[2].

The final phase witnessed the central government's attempt to provide legal protection to local governments. In 1989, the Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the 64th and 65th Constitution amendment bills in Parliament that aimed to bring rural and urban local governments under the protection of the Constitution. The two amendment bills were approved by the lower house (Lok Sabha) but could not get passed the upper house (Rajya Sabha). Later, the P.V. Narsimha Rao government passed the bills as the 73rd

and 74th amendments to the Constitution in 1992 which give constitutional provisions to the rural and urban local governments in India (Joshi, 2012, pp. 24) [2].

Mizoram

In Mizoram, the panchayati raj system has not been implemented, instead the Village Council system has been adopted since the legislation of the Lushai Hills District (Village Council) Act 1953. The Village Council Act 1953 was amended in 2014 which reflected some features of the panchayati raj system. With this amendment, the Village Council is equipped with more powers and most notably one-third seat reservation for women is provided under this act. As the government of Mizoram has not established the urban local government, a voice of concern and advocacy for the introduction of urban local government began to emerge from the people which led to the formation of a voluntary organization called 'The Mizoram Municipal Steering Committee' (MMSC) on 29th march 1999 at the state capital Aizawl. Seminar focusing on the urban local government was organized in 2004 and Non- Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and prominent citizens supported the setting up of urban local government in Mizoram and resolved to request the Chief Minister for an enactment of 'The draft Mizoram Municipalities Bill, 2002' (Lalrintluanga, 2016, p. 178) [3].

Finally, the state Legislative Assembly enacted the Mizoram Municipalities Act 2007. The Aizawl Municipal Council (AMC) was constituted accordingly and the first election was held in 2010. According to the website of the AMC, it covers 83 Local Councils with a resident population of 293,416. There are nineteen wards and six seats are reserved for women as per the one-third seat reservation for women under article 243T of the Constitution which are allotted by rotation to different wards in every election of the AMC. The Aizawl Municipal Council was upgraded to the status of Corporation in 2015. Recently, the Lunglei Municipal Council (LMC) was constituted consisting of 11 wards including 4 reserved seats for women. The first election to the LMC was held on 29 March 2023 at Lunglei. Besides the four reserved wards, one woman was contested in the general ward and won the election leading to a total number of women councillors as five in the first LMC.

Elections of AMC

From the first election in 2010, three elections to the AMC have been held so far with the present term being elected in 2021. In the first two elections held in 2010 and 2015, there were no women candidates in the general wards. Two women contested in the general wards in the 2021 election, which were de-reserved wards where they both were elected in the 2015 election. They won the election to become the first two women elected from the general ward in AMC.

Out of the three elections, the Indian National Congress (INC) secured the highest number of women elected councillors with eight followed by the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) with five each. Two councillors who were elected in the first election in 2010 contested in the Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP) ticket. Based on the electoral history of the AMC, the political party's performance toward the general ward and reserved ward indicated that there was no similar pattern of party's performance in the two different sets of wards. The first election in 2010 was mainly fought between the two

alliances, the INC and the ZNP alliance against the MNF and the Mizoram People's Conference (MPC) alliance (Lalrintluanga, 2016, p.181) [3]. Six reserved wards were won by the INC, the MNF and the ZNP with two seats each. With regard to the general wards, the INC, the MNF and the ZNP won three seats each while the MPC won four seats. The MPC which won the highest number of seats in the general ward fielded one female candidate who lost the election. The INC fielded four, the MNF fielded five, the ZNP fielded two and the BJP fielded one while one female candidate was contested as independent.

In 2015, all six reserved wards were contested by the INC and the MNF, while the ZNP and the BJP contested in four and two wards respectively. The INC won five reserved wards and the remaining one ward was won by the MNF. Meanwhile, the MNF captured ten general wards while the INC which won five reserved wards could capture only two general wards. The MPC which did not field female candidates and fought five general wards won one seat. In 2021, in addition to six reserved seats the INC and the MNF both fielded one female candidate in general wards making the total number of female candidates by the two parties seven. The newly formed ZPM contested in all six reserved wards and the BJP contested in two reserved wards. Out of six reserved wards, ZPM won five while it won only one seat in the general wards. MNF won one reserved ward while it won ten general wards including one ward contested by its female candidate. The INC female candidate in the general ward won the election adding the number of seats won by the party as two. So based on the electoral history of the AMC (in the three elections so far), the pattern of political party's performance toward general ward and reserved ward was not similar, rather the election data indicated that results between general and reserved wards were almost reversed especially in 2015 and 2021 elections.

From municipal to state politics

In total (between 2010 and 2021 elections) there are twenty women elected councillors of the AMC. Out of twenty women, three of them have contested in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly (MLA) elections in 2013 and 2023. The first woman AMC councillor (elected in 2010) that contested in the MLA election fought the 2013 MLA election in the MNF ticket. In the 2023 MLA election, two women councillors from the MNF and the ZPM (elected in 2021) contested and the ZPM candidate won the election. So, out of three women AMC councillors who have contested in the MLA election so far, one was elected.

Between the first and current term of the AMC, three General Elections to MLA (2013, 2018, 2023) have been held in which a number of male AMC councillors were contested in every three elections. Five male councillors of the first term AMC have been contested in the 2013 MLA election in which one was elected. Six male councillors of the second term AMC have been contested in the 2018 MLA election in which two were elected. In the 2023 MLA election, the numbers went down as only two male councillors of the third term AMC contested but lost the election by both of them. Among the male councillors who contested in the MLA election (while serving as councillor of the AMC) one has contested for three times and another one has contested for two times. Few of them had already contested in the MLA election even before they were elected as councillors of the AMC. Besides the above total

three male AMC (ex) councillors who won the MLA election, one ex-councillor who was contested in MLA election before has contested the 2023 MLA election again and won.

Executive Council

The Executive Council of municipal government as per the Mizoram Municipalities Act 2007 consists of the chairman, the vice-chairman and other members nominated by the chairman. The number of nominated members of the Executive Council depends on the nature of municipal government. There should be two in case of a Municipal Board and three in a Municipal Council. In the case of Municipal Corporation, four members from amongst the councillors should be nominated as members of The Executive Council.

In the first Aizawl Municipal government there were three executive councillors in which two are women. Before the end of the first term of the AMC, the municipal government was changed and a new AMC government under the chairmanship of Zanzoliana of ZNP was formed on 30 July 2014. A woman councillor was included among the three executive councillors. On 12 February 2015, the AMC government was changed again and as a result new executive councillors were nominated. In this period also among the three executive councillors one is a woman. From 15 October 2015, the Aizawl Municipal Council was upgraded as Aizawl Municipal Corporation and the Executive Council of the AMC was abolished. The second election to the AMC was held in November 2015 and on 21 September 2020 three councillors were nominated as executive councillors (Vanglaini, 26th November, 2020) [10]. No woman councillors of the AMC were nominated as executive councillors in this term. In the current term of the AMC, four councillors were nominated as executive councillors and among them one is a woman.

Wards Committees

Article 243S provides that all municipalities with a population of 3 lakhs or more to constitute Wards Committees (WC). The WC is the institutional mechanism through which people's participation towards local governance is made possible. Article 243S leaves it to the Legislature of State to make provision of the composition and the territorial area of WC as well as the procedure of filling the seats in WC. As a result, the composition and functions of WC in Indian states are considerably varied and, in some cases, different from one another (De Wit *et al.* 2008, p.69). In Delhi and Haryana, WC consist only of elected councilors while most other states made it open for non- political members to be members of WC either through appointment by the state, the Mayor or Municipal Commissioner or nominated by the electoral representatives of WC (De Wit *et al.* 2008, p.72).

According to the Mizoram Municipalities (Ward Committee and Local Council) Rules 2010, in every ward of Municipality, Ward Committee (WC) shall be constituted which consist of elected councillor, two members each from Local Councils within the Ward and three prominent citizens within the Ward who shall be appointed by the Municipality on the recommendation of the councillor. Among the three appointed members, one shall be a woman as per this rule. The elected councillor of the Ward shall be the chairman of the WC who will preside over the meeting

which shall be held at least once in every three months. So, urban local governments enabled people to participate in their local governance by bridging the gap between the government and the people through the WC. In addition, as reservation of seats for women is applied to the WC, the opportunity of women's participation towards urban local governance is enlarged not just as elected councillors but even as non- elected members through the WC.

According to this rule, common civic services, welfare of the community, social harmony are assigned as the functions of the WC for which it shall make arrangements and activities. It also laid down that enforcing the provisions of the act within the ward as the function of the WC. This includes identifying violation of various provisions of the act in matters concerning construction, municipal and public properties, public nuisance, evasion of taxes and unlicensed activities. The WC is responsible to supervise and monitor the public use of municipal services of water, street lights, parks and playgrounds, community centers etc. It is also the duties of the WC to keep cleanliness by detecting undisposed garbage, providing help to health immunization services, maintenance of essential statistics and numbering of streets and premises. Besides these functions, the WC is also responsible towards implementation of decisions taken by the Municipality in respect of any matter relating to the ward. Aside from these functions, there is a list of tasks allotted to WC as its role including identifying and fixing problems of the ward, preparing a list of developmental schemes. Identifying any unfinished work or works that are of poor quality and use of inferior quality of materials in any work within the ward may also be identified by the WC which should be reported to the concerned authority. However, there are no financial powers and devolution of funds to the WC as per this rule which raise concern about its effectiveness and performance in achieving its role and functions in reality.

Conclusion

As the status of women's political representation in Mizoram is relatively low, the implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in Mizoram is an important milestone for women. With the mandatory reservation of seats for women, women have the opportunity to participate in the urban local government which gives them political experience and confidence. As of now, few (ex) councillors of the AMC have succeeded in the MLA elections though the number of participants in the MLA elections is encouraging especially for women given their historical under representation in elected political bodies. Unless the trend changes in the future, their experience and exposure in local governance and politics through the AMC may continue to open opportunities for both male and female councillors to enter broader politics at the state level. With the mandatory reservation system, women are required to participate in the urban local government which in turn encourages them and gives them opportunity to engage in the larger realm of politics. Some women councillors and ex- councillors of the AMC have been holding positions in their parties which are mainly in the women wings of the party. So, their presence in the urban local government of the AMC has opened doors beyond local level politics as they are involved in political parties which will be helpful towards their political journey in the future.

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