International Journal of Social Science and Humanities
www.humanitiesjournals.com
Online ISSN: 2664-8628
Received: 07-01-2026, Accepted: 06-02-2026, Published: 21-02-2026
Volume 8, Issue 1, 2026, Page No. 121-127

Seats without power: The paradox of scheduled caste legislative representation in Assam

Dr. Arup Kumar Deka
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Suren Das college (Autonomous), Hajo, Assam, India

Abstract
This article analyses the nature and limits of Scheduled Caste (SC) political empowerment in Assam, challenging dominant interpretations derived largely from North Indian experiences. It situates SC politics within Assam's distinctive socio-political milieu, where caste is deeply imbricated with ethnic, linguistic, and regional cleavages. Drawing on a mixed-methods design that combines longitudinal legislative data (1952–2021) with qualitative interviews, the study examines patterns of representation and political practice among SC legislators in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The analysis demonstrates a persistent disjunction between descriptive and substantive representation. Although constitutional reservations secure proportional numerical presence, SC legislators—predominantly from the Kaibarta community—operate with limited political autonomy. High electoral turnover, dependence on dominant party structures, and the privileging of migration and Assamese nationalist agendas constrain the articulation of an autonomous Dalit political project. The article further highlights gendered exclusion and intra-caste fragmentation, particularly between Kaibartas and Namasudras, arguing that formal inclusion in Assam's multi-ethnic polity has not translated into substantive empowerment.

Keywords: Scheduled caste (SC), assam legislative assembly, caste, ethnicity, kaibarta, namasudra community

Introduction

The political empowerment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitutes a foundational yet uneven dimension of India's post-independence democratic project. While formal mechanisms of Dalit representation acquired institutional salience after 1947, their origins lie in a longer history of caste-based exclusion and socio-economic subordination. The Constitution of India sought to confront these structural injustices by reimagining citizenship through a transformative framework that coupled formal political equality with compensatory justice. Acknowledging the cumulative disadvantages faced by SCs, the framers institutionalized affirmative measures—most notably reservations in legislatures and public employment, alongside legal safeguards—intended to facilitate social mobility and political participation (Jaffrelot, 2003) [19]. These provisions were conceived not merely as protective mechanisms but as enabling instruments designed to secure marginalized communities' access to power and influence within governance structures. Despite this constitutional ambition, the scope and substance of Dalit political empowerment have varied markedly across regions. In states such as Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, sustained Dalit mobilization reshaped political discourse, party competition, and modes of representation (Pai, 2002) [27]. Elsewhere, however, constitutional inclusion has produced more constrained outcomes, underscoring the gap between formal rights and substantive political agency. This divergence reflects the mediating role of regional social hierarchies, political cultures, and party systems in translating institutional guarantees into effective empowerment. Assam presents a distinctive and under-theorized case within this broader landscape. Here, caste politics is embedded within a complex matrix of ethnic plurality, linguistic contestation, and migration-related anxieties that have historically structured political mobilization (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 2014) [3, 23]. Unlike regions where caste functions as a primary axis of political identity, Assam's public sphere is dominated by discourses of indigeneity and territorial belonging, relegating caste-based claims to a subordinate position. The relatively small and spatially uneven SC population—concentrated in districts such as Nagaon, Barpeta, Cachar, and Dibrugarh (Government of Assam, 2021) [13], further weakens electoral leverage and access to distributive resources. Although Articles 330 and 332 guarantee descriptive representation, this presence has rarely translated into substantive influence. Consistent with Pitkin's (1967) [29] distinction, SC legislators operate within centralized party structures that constrain autonomy and compel alignment with dominant regional narratives, rendering Dalit representation largely symbolic rather than transformative.

This study critically examines the nature and limits of Scheduled Caste (SC) political empowerment in Assam by moving beyond an exclusive focus on formal constitutional inclusion. It interrogates the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation of SC legislators, analyses how ethnic, linguistic, and regional political dynamics mediate caste-based claims, and evaluates the extent to which political reservations translate into effective influence over governance and policy outcomes. Situating SC representation within Assam's distinctive socio-political terrain, the study seeks to identify the structural, institutional, and discursive conditions that shape Dalit political agency. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design. Quantitative analysis draws on longitudinal data (1952–2021) on SC representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly, examining patterns of candidature, party affiliation, tenure, and committee participation. This is complemented by qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of legislative debates. The paper is organized into sections on theoretical framework, historical context, empirical patterns of representation, qualitative analysis of political practice, and concluding reflections.

Theoretical Background

This study is anchored in Hanna Pitkin's (1967) [29] seminal theory of political representation, which provides a critical framework for evaluating the nature and quality of Scheduled Caste (SC) representation beyond mere numerical inclusion. Pitkin's distinction between descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where constitutional safeguards ensure SC presence in legislatures but do not automatically translate into meaningful political influence. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of SC legislators; symbolic representation captures the legitimacy and meanings attached to that presence; and substantive representation concerns whether representatives actively advance the interests of their communities. Applying this framework enables the study to move beyond aggregate counts of SC legislators and interrogate the depth, effectiveness, and political consequences of their representation, particularly in Assam. Pitkin's model is further enriched through engagement with theories of identity politics, which emphasize the role of social identities—caste, ethnicity, and language—in structuring political mobilization and alignments. In Assam, caste operates within a layered and often subordinate hierarchy of identities, where ethnic nationalism and regionalism historically dominate political discourse. This intersectional configuration helps explain why caste-based demands, despite constitutional protection, often remain politically muted or strategically sidelined. Identity politics thus illuminates how SC legislators navigate multiple and sometimes competing identity claims, shaping both their representational strategies and political constraints.

Elite theory adds a crucial analytical dimension by foregrounding the concentration of power within party hierarchies and leadership networks. As Kothari (1970) and Weiner (1967) [21, 37] observed, SC legislators frequently operate within elite-dominated party structures that limit autonomy and restrict the articulation of caste-based agendas. Resource asymmetries, patronage dependencies, and centralized decision-making mechanisms often constrain their capacity to convert descriptive presence into substantive outcomes. This perspective is essential for understanding why constitutional representation does not necessarily disrupt entrenched power relations. These theoretical insights resonate with earlier sociological scholarship on caste and politics. Rudolph and Rudolph's (1967) [30] concept of "instrumental collectivism" demonstrated how caste identities adapt within democratic institutions, functioning as strategic resources rather than residual traditional forms. Complementing this view, Béteille (1969) and Srinivas (1962) [34] highlighted how modernization transformed caste into a flexible and competitive political identity, enabling marginalized groups to negotiate access to power through democratic participation. Later scholars such as Jaffrelot (2003) and Guru (2009) [17, 19] deepened this analysis by emphasizing Dalit agency, dignity, and moral assertion. Jaffrelot's notion of a "silent revolution" captured the transformative impact of Dalit mobilization on Indian democracy, while Guru underscored the cultural and ethical dimensions of representation, arguing that political presence must restore dignity and self-respect, not merely secure seats. Together, these perspectives provide a layered theoretical framework that situates SC representation within broader debates on democracy, identity, and power. By integrating Pitkin's theory of representation with identity politics, elite theory, and sociological analyses of caste, this study critically examines the conditions under which SC political representation in Assam remains symbolic, constrained, or substantively transformative.

Scheduled Caste communities and demographic distribution

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam constitute a numerically limited yet socially heterogeneous category, encompassing communities such as the Kaibartas, Namasudras, Muchis, Bhangis, and several smaller sub-caste groups (Government of Assam, 2021) [13]. While collectively positioned as a demographic minority within the state, these groups are far from uniform. Variations in historical trajectories, occupational practices, spatial distribution, and cultural affiliation have produced differentiated patterns of social mobility and political participation. Recognizing this internal diversity is therefore essential for any meaningful analysis of representation, as each community's socio-economic location and regional concentration directly influence its access to political visibility and leadership opportunities. Among the SC communities, the Kaibartas constitute the most prominent group, accounting for nearly 60 per cent of the total (Census of India, 2011) [6]. This dominance broadly reflects their demographic strength, particularly in central and upper Assam, where they are concentrated in districts along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The Kaibartas, associated primarily with fishing and cultivation, constitute the largest SC group and developed relatively cohesive community structures have been integral to the riverine economy of the region. Their close engagement with aquatic ecosystems positioned them as key contributors to local livelihood systems, market networks, and resource management practices. Over time, processes such as educational expansion, agrarian change, and land reforms have enabled segments of the community to diversify their occupational base, moving into agriculture, petty trade, and public-sector employment. This gradual socio-economic mobility, combined with their numerical presence in specific constituencies, has translated into relatively higher levels of political incorporation, with major political parties frequently nominating Kaibarta candidates to consolidate SC electoral support (Census of India, 2011) [6].

The Namasudras, comprising approximately 25 percent of the legislators, represent another significant SC community with a distinct historical and cultural profile. Concentrated mainly in the Barak Valley, they trace their origins to East Bengal, with migration and settlement occurred during colonial and post-colonial periods (Bandyophadhaya, 1997)**.** The Namasudras—many of whom migrated to Assam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—experienced layered marginalization as both a caste group and a migrant population (Chatterjee, 1999) [9]. Traditionally engaged in agriculture, fishing, and small-scale trade, the Namasudras carried with them a socio-cultural orientation shaped by Bengali linguistic and religious traditions. Their settlement patterns were closely linked to agrarian restructuring, refugee movements, and the political reorganization of the region in the mid-twentieth century. Consequently, their political mobilization has been shaped by concerns over language, citizenship, migration, and

cultural recognition, differentiating them from Assamese-speaking SC communities. These dynamics have produced distinctive patterns of representation, particularly in Barak Valley constituencies where identity-based issues remain politically salient (Nath, 2018) [25].

The remaining 15 percent of SC legislators belong to smaller yet socially significant communities such as the Muchis and Bhangis. The Muchis, historically associated with leatherwork and artisanal production, have faced entrenched forms of caste-based stigma linked to occupational hierarchies. However, urbanization, educational access, and changing labour markets have facilitated limited occupational diversification into service-sector employment and small-scale entrepreneurship (Census of India, 2011) [6]. The Bhangis, traditionally engaged in sanitation and waste management, constitute one of the smallest SC communities in Assam and are largely concentrated in urban and semi-urban municipalities. Despite their modest demographic size, their role has been central to debates on labour rights, urban governance, and social dignity. Taken together, this internal heterogeneity underscores the limitations of treating Scheduled Caste politics in Assam as a homogeneous or unified phenomenon. Instead, it must be understood as a constellation of diverse socio-cultural groups whose historically contingent experiences continue to shape uneven and complex patterns of political engagement and representation.

The geography of SC-reserved constituencies has significantly shaped the contours of caste politics in Assam. Since independence, the number of SC-reserved assembly seats has remained fixed at eight, determined by demographic criteria and largely unchanged across delimitation cycles (Government of India, 2011) [6]. These constituencies are concentrated predominantly in central and lower Assam—particularly in districts such as Nagaon, Barpeta, Dhubri, Kamrup, and Goalpara (Nath, 2018) [25]. This regional clustering reflects historical settlement patterns and the demographic predominance of the Kaibarta community in these areas. The Barak Valley, despite hosting a substantial Namasudra population, contains comparatively fewer SC-reserved constituencies. This outcome derives from delimitation procedures emphasizing proportionality at the district level, thereby producing long-term representational asymmetries (Chatterjee, 1999; Nath, 2018) [9, 25]. The concentration of reserved seats in specific districts reinforces Kaibarta dominance within SC representation while constraining the electoral prospects of other SC sub-groups. Moreover, SC communities residing outside reserved constituencies frequently remain electorally peripheral, dependent on the priorities of dominant caste or ethnic actors.

Gradually, the spread of education among the SC communities increased. During 1950s and 1960s, most SC legislators had only secondary or lower levels of education, shaped by limited access to schooling, economic constraints, and entrenched caste-based barriers. Early leaders nonetheless emerged through grassroots activism and community mobilization rather than formal qualifications. From the 1980s onward, and especially after the 1990s, this pattern shifted markedly. Nearly 70% of SC legislators in this period possessed graduate or postgraduate degrees, indicating enhanced educational and social capital. This transformation is linked to expanded access to public education, affirmative action in higher education, and the rise of an educated SC middle class. Similar trends have been noted nationally, where reservation policies facilitated the political entry of a more educated Dalit elite (Jaffrelot, 2003) [19]. In Assam, this shift has strengthened the representational capacity and policy influence of SC legislators.

Legislative Representation of SC's in Assam

The historical evolution of caste politics in Assam diverges significantly from patterns observed in several other Indian states. In contrast to regions such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh—where caste-based mobilization generated transformative social reform movements and durable political realignments—Assam's political trajectory has been characterized by a comparatively muted articulation of caste identity (Guha, 2013; Jaffrelot, 2003) [19]. Rather than caste cleavages, the state's politics has historically been structured around ethnic, linguistic, and regional contestations, particularly those concerning indigeneity, language, and migration (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 2014) [3, 23].

Within this configuration, the representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitutes a distinctive yet underexamined dimension of Assam's political landscape. Although SC communities such as the Kaibartas, Namasudras, Muchis, and Bhangis have participated in electoral politics since independence—primarily through constitutional reservations—their political incorporation has largely occurred within mainstream party structures rather than through autonomous caste-based mobilization (Nath, 2018) [25]. Consequently, while SC presence in formal institutions is visible, questions persist regarding the depth and transformative quality of their representation.

Institutionally, SC representation has been structured through a relatively stable reservation framework. Since independence, eight Assembly constituencies have remained reserved for SC candidates, broadly corresponding to demographic proportions and demonstrating procedural continuity across delimitation exercises (Jaffrelot, 2003) [19]. Between 1952 and 2021, more than one hundred individuals were elected from these constituencies, with overall SC representation fluctuating between 6 and 8 percent—approximately commensurate with population share (Government of India, 2011) [6]. However, descriptive parity has not translated into sustained substantive influence. Representation has remained largely confined to reserved constituencies, with limited mobility into general seats or key decision-making arenas, thereby constraining broader institutional leverage.

High legislative turnover has further inhibited the consolidation of durable SC leadership. Approximately 65 percent of SC legislators have served only a single term, and roughly 25 percent secured two consecutive terms. Long-term continuity has been restricted to a small cohort, predominantly affiliated with the Congress during the 1970s, when centralized party structures facilitated relatively stable access to office (Election Commission of India, 2021). As Kothari (1970) [13, 21] argues, institutional continuity is critical for bureaucratic access, policy learning, and sustained advocacy. Its relative absence in Assam has limited the accumulation of political capital among SC legislators and weakened collective bargaining capacity within legislative hierarchies.

The spatial distribution of SC-reserved constituencies has also shaped internal dynamics of representation. Reserved seats are concentrated primarily in central and lower Assam—particularly in districts such as Nagaon, Barpeta, and Dhubri—where SC population densities, especially of the Kaibartas, are historically higher. This demographic concentration has facilitated sustained Kaibarta predominance within the SC legislative sphere. Their numerical strength, combined with comparatively greater socio-economic integration into Assamese society, has enhanced electoral competitiveness and political visibility. By contrast, the Barak Valley—despite a substantial Namasudra population—contains fewer SC-reserved constituencies due to the dispersed settlement of SC communities across electoral units. Such fragmentation reduces the likelihood that individual constituencies meet reservation thresholds, contributing to the relative underrepresentation of Namasudras (Reference). As Nath (2018) [25] observes, Kaibarta predominance is structurally embedded in demographic geography and historical settlement patterns rather than merely electoral strategy. The result is an internally differentiated SC political field marked by regional and community-level asymmetries.

Electoral competition has further embedded SC representation within dominant party structures. Between 1952 and 2011, the Indian National Congress accounted for nearly 70 percent of SC MLAs, underscoring its hegemonic position in reserved constituencies. Since 2016, the Bharatiya Janata Party has displaced the Congress in most SC-reserved seats, reflecting partisan realignment rather than a transformation in representational modality (Election Commission of India, 2021) [13]. SC incorporation thus remains mediated by electorally dominant parties, limiting space for autonomous caste-based mobilization. Unlike contexts such as Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, where Dalit identity consolidated into cohesive political platforms—most notably through the Bahujan Samaj Party (Pai, 2002) [27]—Assam's multi-ethnic political environment has discouraged overt caste consolidation.

Competitive pressures within reserved constituencies reinforce this pattern. Narrow victory margins—often below five percent—compel candidates to cultivate heterogeneous electoral coalitions. Campaigns therefore foreground regional and developmental concerns such as flood control, infrastructure, and employment, while caste-specific agendas remain muted. This dynamic substantiates Baruah's (2020) [4] argument that caste functions as a secondary political identity in Assam, subordinated to broader ethnic and regional cleavages. Interviews with legislators corroborate this tendency, as most emphasized representing all constituents rather than articulating a distinct Dalit agenda. Such positioning reflects Pitkin's (1967) [29] distinction between descriptive and substantive representation: although institutional mechanisms secure SC presence in the Assembly, sustained advocacy for caste-specific transformation remains circumscribed.

Party discipline imposes additional constraints. Legislators report limited autonomy in shaping legislative priorities, particularly on caste-related issues. This aligns with Chandra's (2004) [7] account of patronage-based politics, wherein partisan loyalty and electoral pragmatism supersede constituency-specific advocacy. SC leaders are incorporated into dominant party frameworks without substantively reshaping policy agendas, exemplifying elite co-optation in Mosca's (1939) sense. Welfare benefits are typically delivered through universal schemes rather than targeted redistributive interventions, reinforcing Heller and Mukhopadhyay's (2017) [18] observation that affirmative representation in India often produces incremental rather than transformative outcomes.

Socio-economic trajectories among SC legislators nevertheless indicate gradual change. In the early post-independence decades, most SC MLAs entered politics from agrarian, manual, or lower-level government occupations, reflecting structural constraints including limited educational access, restricted occupational mobility, and entrenched caste discrimination (reference). Political engagement was frequently rooted in local struggles over land rights, wages, and welfare entitlements (reference). From the 1980s onward, pre-political backgrounds diversified, with increasing representation from professional fields such as education, law, and social work. As Pai (2002) [27] suggests in a broader Indian context, the entry of professionally trained individuals into Dalit politics signals wider socio-political transformation. In Assam, this professionalization has enhanced legislative competence and bureaucratic engagement. Yet these advances remain individualized rather than indicative of a consolidated or programmatically cohesive subaltern political elite.

Gender representation exposes a particularly acute dimension of exclusion. Between 1952 and 2021, only three SC women were elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly (Election Commission of India, 2021) [13], underscoring the intersectional marginalization of caste and gender. Although constitutional reservations have expanded caste-based inclusion, benefits have accrued disproportionately to men. Structural barriers—including limited access to education, land, financial resources, and political networks—intersect with gender norms assigning disproportionate domestic responsibilities to women. Political parties often hesitate to nominate SC women, construing them as electorally nonviable (Verma, 2018). As Guru (2009) [17, 35] argues, Dalit women frequently remain marginalized within both mainstream and subaltern political formations, while Deshpande (2011) [12] highlights the reinforcing effects of economic marginalization and patriarchal norms. Empirical scholarship demonstrates that women's political participation can enhance welfare-oriented and community-centered policymaking (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) [10]. Their near absence therefore narrows deliberative diversity and limits substantive representation at the intersection of caste and gender, reinforcing Phillips's (1995) [28] contention that representation entails not merely numerical inclusion but transformation of political priorities.

Fragmentation among SC communities compounds these structural constraints. The Namasudras of the Barak Valley and the Kaibartas of the Brahmaputra Valley have rarely converged on a unified political platform, and caste identity has not crystallized into a cohesive ideological force. Subsumed within broader ethnic contestations, SC politics in Assam remains internally differentiated and organizationally dispersed. Combined with high turnover, gender exclusion, demographic asymmetries, and party mediation, this fragmentation inhibits the emergence of a durable subaltern leadership capable of sustained agenda-setting.

In sum, SC representation in Assam embodies a paradox of constitutional inclusion without commensurate

empowerment. Reservation has ensured numerical presence broadly aligned with demographic share, and rising educational attainment among legislators signals incremental mobility (Jaffrelot, 2003; Verma, 2018) [19, 35]. Yet ethnicized political competition, spatial demography, partisan mediation, legislative instability, internal fragmentation, and gender exclusion collectively circumscribe transformative potential. SC legislators occupy visible institutional positions, but their capacity to redefine policy priorities or consolidate autonomous political agency remains structurally constrained. Assam thus illustrates a model of representation that secures descriptive inclusion while reproducing substantive subordination within a predominantly ethnic-regional political order.

Structural constraints of SC representations in Assam

Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam maintain a stable numerical presence in the Legislative Assembly; however, this descriptive representation has not translated into substantive advocacy, understood as the consistent pursuit of community-specific interests. Legislators' structural dependence on mainstream political parties constrains their capacity to articulate autonomous agendas or foreground caste-based concerns. As a result, caste-based mobilization in Assam remains subsumed within broader ethnic, linguistic, and regional formations, corroborating the analyses of Baruah (2020) and Nath (2018) [4, 25]. Unlike in northern India, where Dalit identity operates as a cohesive axis of political mobilization, in Assam it is refracted through Assamese nationalism, Bengali identity politics, and tribal assertions. This intersectional embedding fragments collective Dalit political action and impedes the consolidation of a unified caste-based platform (Chandhoke, 2011) [8].

Caste remains a durable axis of social stratification in India, structuring access to political institutions, electoral competition, and governance. In Assam—characterized by ethnic plurality, linguistic heterogeneity, and layered histories of migration—caste politics assumes a distinctive yet comparatively muted form. Although political discourse has been dominated by ethnic mobilization, language movements, and contestations over immigration (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 2014) [3, 23], caste continues to shape social identity and political representation. SCs, constituting approximately 7 percent of the population, experience limited empowerment: constitutionally mandated reservations ensure formal visibility, but their influence within broader party coalition's remains circumscribed (Government of India, 2011) [6]. The persistence of localized and fragmented caste identities constrains the articulation of a cohesive SC political agenda, further reinforced by the electoral predominance of numerically larger groups such as the Kaibartas (Nath, 2018) [25]. Moreover, caste-based mobilization is frequently subordinated to ethnic and linguistic alignments that more decisively structure political outcomes (Weiner, 1978; Baruah, 1999) [2, 38].

The institutional foundations of modern Assamese politics were shaped by an emergent nationalist elite that foregrounded linguistic and cultural consolidation, particularly in response to demographic shifts associated with migration from Bengal (Misra, 2014; Weiner, 1978) [23, 38]. This privileging of ethnicity over caste constrained the development of autonomous caste-based organizations and structured the trajectory of postcolonial political competition. The interaction between caste and ethnicity thus constitutes a central axis of Assam's political order. Unlike states where caste operates as the primary mode of political aggregation, Assam's political field has been organized predominantly around Assamese nationalism, tribal autonomy movements, and migration politics (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 2014) [3, 23], limiting the autonomous articulation of SC demands.

The Assam Movement (1979–1985) exemplified the centrality of identity-based mobilization structured around language and citizenship (Weiner, 1978; Misra, 2014) [23, 38]. SC communities participated within broader collective frameworks rather than as a distinct caste bloc—a pattern that persists. SC voters frequently mobilize through ethnic, regional, or developmental identities rather than cohesive caste organization (Baruah, 1999) [2]. Electorally, SC candidates must appeal to heterogeneous constituencies encompassing caste Hindus, Muslims, tribal communities, and migrant groups (Nath, 2018) [25]. Such demographic diversity dilutes the efficacy of caste-exclusive appeals and incentivizes cross-cutting coalition-building. Regional differentiation further conditions political behaviour: while the Brahmaputra Valley's politics are anchored in Assamese identity and minority relations, the Barak Valley's priorities revolve around language rights and minority protection (Chatterjee, 1999) [9]. SC communities in each region navigate distinct identity hierarchies, reinforcing the context-specific and embedded character of caste politics.

Caste politics in Assam therefore embodies a paradox of democratic inclusion. Reservation policies have secured descriptive representation and institutional visibility (Pitkin, 1967) [29], yet multiple structural constraints inhibit substantive empowerment. The dominance of ethnic and regional agendas circumscribes caste-based policy articulation (Baruah, 2005) [3]; high legislative turnover undermines continuity and leadership consolidation (Kothari, 1970) [21]; and party dependence restricts autonomy, reinforcing centralized control over minority representatives (Weiner, 1978) [38]. Intra-SC fragmentation—particularly the predominance of Kaibartas—limits pan-SC solidarity and marginalizes smaller groups such as Namasudras and Bansphors (Nath, 2018) [25]. Persistent gender exclusion further reproduces inequalities within caste representation (Verma, 2018) [35]. Collectively, these dynamics reveal a political order in which caste structures social hierarchy but is mediated electorally and institutionally through ethnicity, regionalism, and party control. Assam's experience thus illuminates the limits of institutional reservation in multi-ethnic polities where broader identity cleavages dominate public discourse: while descriptive inclusion has been achieved, substantive empowerment requires deeper institutional reform, strengthened community organization, and greater autonomy for SC leadership within the state's ethnically plural political framework.

Theoretical discussion

A theoretical reading of Scheduled Caste (SC) representation in Assam through Hanna Pitkin's framework helps clarify the gap between formal inclusion and effective empowerment. Pitkin (1967) [29] distinguishes between descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation. Applying these categories to Assam reveals that while descriptive representation has been institutionally secured,

substantive representation remains structurally constrained. At the level of descriptive representation, SCs have achieved stable numerical presence in the Assam Legislative Assembly through constitutional reservations. The existence of reserved constituencies ensures that SC legislators are physically present in the law-making body in proportion to their population. In Pitkin's terms, the Assembly "resembles" the social composition of the polity to a limited extent. However, descriptive presence alone does not guarantee influence over policy or agenda-setting.

Symbolic representation is also partially evident. The election of SC legislators signals formal recognition and inclusion within the democratic framework. Their presence affirms the legitimacy of the constitutional promise of equality and compensatory justice. Yet symbolism becomes hollow when representatives lack autonomy or the capacity to articulate distinct community concerns. In Assam's ethnically charged political environment, SC legislators are often perceived primarily as party representatives or regional actors rather than as advocates of a Dalit political project. The central tension emerges at the level of substantive representation, which Pitkin defines as acting in the interest of the represented. In Assam, multiple structural factors weaken this dimension. First, SC legislators are embedded within centralized party structures, limiting independent policy initiatives. Second, electoral competition in socially heterogeneous constituencies compels candidates to prioritize broad developmental issues over caste-specific demands. Third, intra-SC fragmentation—particularly the predominance of the Kaibarta community—prevents the consolidation of a unified agenda. Finally, gender exclusion further narrows the range of interests articulated within the category of SC representation. From a Pitkinian perspective, Assam demonstrates a model where descriptive and limited symbolic representation coexist without robust substantive outcomes. The case underscores Pitkin's core insight: representation is not merely about presence, but about effective action. In multi-ethnic political settings like Assam, institutional reservation may secure seats, but without autonomy, continuity, and collective organization, it struggles to transform structural inequalities into meaningful political power.

Conclusion

This study has examined the nature and limits of Scheduled Caste (SC) political representation in Assam by situating it within the state's distinctive socio-political context. While constitutional reservations under Articles 330 and 332 of the Constitution of India have ensured a stable level of descriptive representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly, this numerical presence has not translated into substantive political empowerment. SC legislators have remained institutionally visible but structurally constrained. The findings demonstrate a persistent gap between descriptive and substantive representation in the sense articulated by Hanna Pitkin. Although SC members occupy reserved seats, their ability to influence legislative priorities, shape policy debates, or articulate a cohesive Dalit agenda remains limited. Electoral competition in socially heterogeneous constituencies compels them to prioritize broad developmental and regional concerns over caste-specific demands. At the same time, dependence on dominant party structures restricts autonomy and reinforces centralized control over decision-making. Assam's multi-ethnic political environment further conditions SC representation. Ethnic nationalism, linguistic contestation, and migration politics have historically structured political mobilization, leaving caste as a secondary axis of political identity. Intra-caste fragmentation—particularly the predominance of the Kaibarta community and the relative marginalization of Namasudras and smaller groups—has prevented the emergence of a unified SC political platform. Gender exclusion adds another layer of inequality, narrowing the scope of interests represented within the category of SC leadership. Overall, Assam illustrates a paradox of democratic inclusion without corresponding empowerment. Institutional reservation has secured formal access to legislative space, but substantive transformation remains limited by structural, demographic, and party-based constraints. Meaningful empowerment would require greater political autonomy, stronger collective organization across SC sub-groups, and institutional reforms that enable representatives to move beyond symbolic presence toward sustained policy influence within Assam's ethnically plural political order.

References

1. Bandyopadhyay S. Caste, protest and identity in colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947. Curzon Press, 1997.
2. Baruah S. India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
3. Baruah S. Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India. Oxford University Press, 2005.
4. Baruah S. In the name of the nation: India and its Northeast. Stanford University Press, 2020.
5. Béteille A. Caste, class and power: Changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village. University of California Press, 1969.
6. Census of India. SC-14: Scheduled caste population by religious community, Assam—2011. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2011. Available from: https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/2121
7. Chandra K. Why ethnic parties succeed: Patronage and ethnic head counts in India. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
8. Chandhoke N. The search for substantive democracy: Dalit politics and beyond. Indian Journal of Political Science,2011:72(3):411–430.
9. Chatterjee P. The present history of West Bengal: Essays in political criticism. Oxford University Press, 1999.
10. Chattopadhyay R, Duflo E. Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. Econometrica,2004:72(5):1409–1443.
11. Chhibber P. Religious practice and democracy in India. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
12. Deshpande A. The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India. Oxford University Press, 2011.
13. Election Commission of India. Statistical report on general election, 2021 to the legislative assembly of Assam, 2021. Available from: https://ceoassam.nic.in
14. Government of Assam. Statistical handbook of Assam 2021. Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2021.
15. Government of India. Census of India 2011. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2011.
16. Guha A. Planter-raj to swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam, 1826–1947. Indian Council of Historical Research, 1983.

17. Guru G. Humiliation: Claims and contexts. Oxford University Press, 2009.
18. Heller P, Mukhopadhyay P. State capacity and inclusive development: Understanding political representation. UNU-WIDER Working Paper No. 2017/74. United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, 2017.
19. Jaffrelot C. India's silent revolution: The rise of the lower castes in North India. Columbia University Press, 2003.
20. Jodhka SS, Shah G. Comparative contexts of Dalit politics in India. Journal of Social and Political Studies,2010:12(2):45–67.
21. Kothari R. Politics in India. Orient Longman, 1970.
22. Kumar A. Political representation and social justice in India. Oxford University Press, 2017.
23. Misra U. India's North-East: Identity movements, state, and civil society. Oxford University Press, 2014.
24. Mitra SK. Politics in India: Structure, process and policy. Routledge, 2016.
25. Nath D. Politics of caste in Assam: A study of Scheduled Caste communities. 2018.
26. Omvedt G. Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India. Sage Publications, 1994.
27. Pai S. Dalit assertion and the unfinished democratic revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. Sage Publications, 2002.
28. Phillips A. The politics of presence. Oxford University Press, 1995.
29. Pitkin HF. The concept of representation. University of California Press, 1967.
30. Rudolph LI, Rudolph SH. The modernity of tradition: Political development in India. University of Chicago Press, 1967.
31. Saikia A. Social change and development in Assam: The role of the marginalized. Guwahati University Press, 2011.
32. Sarma P. Political representation of Scheduled Castes in Assam: A study of legislative behavior. Journal of North East Studies,2016:8(2):55–70.
33. Singh B. Electoral politics and social engineering in Assam: BJP's rise and strategies. Indian Journal of Political Science,2020:81(1):89–112.
34. Srinivas MN. Caste in modern India and other essays. Asia Publishing House, 1962.
35. Verma A. Women, caste, and political representation in Northeast India. Northeast Social Research Review,2018:20(1):67–85.
36. Verma R. Political participation and empowerment among Dalits in India. Asian Journal of Political Science,2018:26(3):290–308.
37. Weiner M. Party politics in India: The development of a multi-party system. Princeton University Press, 1967.
38. Weiner M. Sons of the soil: Migration and ethnic conflict in India. Princeton University Press, 1978.
39. Yadav Y. Understanding the second democratic upsurge: Trends of Bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s. In: Frankel FR, Hasan Z, Bhargava R, Arora B, editors. Transforming India: Social and political dynamics of democracy. Oxford University Press, 2000, 120–145.