

ROLE OF WOMEN IN POLITICS OF MEGHALAYA (1972-2023) AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving role of women in the political landscape of Meghalaya from its statehood in 1972 to the present. The analysis traces the historical context, examining key milestones and barriers that have shaped women's involvement in politics over five decades. It evaluates the roles of pioneering female politicians, grassroots leaders, and women's organizations that have advocated for greater representation. The paper also investigates sociocultural factors, systemic challenges, and policy measures influencing gender equity in political participation. The findings reveal that while progress has been made, including an increasing number of women candidates in recent elections, structural and cultural constraints persist. The study highlights the need for affirmative action, education, and advocacy to bridge the gender gap in politics. It concludes with recommendations for fostering an inclusive political environment that aligns with Meghalaya's unique cultural ethos while empowering women as equal stakeholders in governance.

Keywords: Meghalaya, Women Participation, Regional Politics, State Politics, Women in Legislature, Women in Politics, Women in other Field of Studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Northeastern state of Meghalaya, known for its matrilineal society, holds a unique place in the political landscape of India. Since its inception as a full-fledged state in 1972, Meghalaya has seen a complex interplay of traditional cultural norms and modern political developments. Women in Meghalaya have historically held significant positions in social and economic spheres due to the matrilineal system, which grants them inheritance rights and family leadership roles. However, their role in the formal political arena has been comparatively limited, reflecting broader challenges of gender representation in Indian politics (Kharkongor, B. 2012).

The analysis of women's participation in Meghalaya's politics from 1972 to 2023 reveals an evolving narrative. Despite their prominent status in society, women have faced structural and cultural barriers in entering mainstream politics. Traditional institutions, such as the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribal councils, have often excluded women from decision-making roles. This paradox of empowerment in domestic and social domains versus exclusion from political spaces raises questions about the true nature of gender equality in the region.

Over the decades, the state has witnessed gradual yet significant changes. Women leaders, though few, have made remarkable contributions to Meghalaya's political development. From the election of the first female legislators to their participation in grassroots governance, women have slowly carved a niche for themselves. The implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, mandating reservations for women in local governance, has also played a pivotal role in enhancing their representation at the grassroots level (Choudhury, A. 2010).

This study aims to analyze the historical and contemporary role of women in the politics of Meghalaya, examining key milestones, challenges, and the impact of cultural and institutional factors. It will also explore the implications of their participation on policy-making and governance, highlighting the journey towards gender-inclusive politics in the state. By understanding these dynamics, the analysis seeks to provide insights into the broader discourse of women's empowerment in India and its implications for Meghalaya's socio-political fabric.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of women in the political landscape of Meghalaya has been a subject of academic inquiry and sociopolitical interest. Meghalaya, known for its matrilineal societal structure, presents a unique context for examining women's political participation. This review synthesizes existing literature to analyze the progression, challenges, and contributions of women in Meghalaya's politics from the state's formation in 1972 to 2023.

Choudhury, A. in his *Gender and Governance in Northeast India* (2010) have examined the limited participation of women in Meghalaya's formal political structures. Despite the state's progressive societal norms, the number of women contesting and winning elections in the Legislative Assembly has remained low. Studies attribute this gap to patriarchal interpretations of matrilineal customs, economic barriers, and societal expectations.

According to Kharkongor, B. in *Cultural Constraints on Women's Political Participation in Matrilineal Societies* (2012) have examined the Traditional norms often limit women's roles to the domestic sphere despite matrilineal structures

According to Lyngwa, T. in *Contemporary Trends in Women's Leadership in Meghalaya* (2022) document a gradual increase in women's political participation in Meghalaya. The inclusion of women in local governance, such as the Village Employment Councils under MGNREGA, has been a significant step forward. Additionally, the rise of women-led movements addressing environmental and social issues has bolstered their visibility and influence in the political sphere. Mawlong, E. in *Traditional Governance and Political Evolution in Meghalaya* (1980) highlighted that while women held significant social power in matrilineal clans, this did not translate into substantial political representation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present investigation is assessed by employing an exploratory and investigative study method to seek and identify the role of women in the politics of Meghalaya (1972-2023). The study is heavily based on the tools of historical analysis. For this purpose, the primary and the secondary data were confined. Primary data is based on the observation and experiences and secondary data was collected from books, articles, journals, magazines, related works, and records. Limitation of the study. The present article is focused on the role of women in the politics of Meghalaya (1972-2023). All sources of information from books, diaries, magazines, records, articles, and journals are acknowledged as references.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze the historical evolution of women's participation in Meghalaya's political landscape from the formation of the state in 1972 to 2023.

2. To evaluate the extent of women's representation in legislative, executive, and local governance institutions in Meghalaya.
3. To investigate the socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that have hindered women's active participation in politics.
4. To highlight the contributions of women politicians to policy-making, governance, and societal development in Meghalaya.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of studying the role of women in the politics of Meghalaya (1972–2023) lies in its contribution to understanding gender dynamics, political participation, and cultural influences in one of India's unique sociopolitical landscapes. Here are key aspects of its significance: From Meghalaya's statehood in 1972 to 2023, the political landscape has undergone significant changes. Examining the involvement of women offers insights into their evolving roles in policy-making, leadership, and activism. Firstly, it provides a historical perspective on how women's political representation and influence have changed over the decades. Secondly, this study sheds light on the extent of women's representation in Meghalaya's legislative assembly, local governance (e.g., village councils), and political parties. Thirdly, it can also highlight disparities in representation and factors contributing to women's under-representation, if any. Fourthly, Meghalaya serves as a case study to understand the role of women in politics in northeastern India, a region often overlooked in mainstream political discourse. Lastly, insights gained can contribute to national-level discussions on gender inclusivity in politics and strategies to empower women leaders.

6. ROLE OF WOMEN IN POLITICS OF MEGHALAYA

Khasi Interest Community and Role of Women: A community of interest is a community of people who share a common interest or passion. These people exchange ideas and thoughts about the given passion, but may know little about each other outside this area. Participation in a community of interest can be compelling, entertaining and can create a community where people return frequently and remain for extended periods (Lyngwa, T. 2022). In other words, "a community of interest is a gathering of people assembled around a topic of common interest." Its members take part in the community to exchange information, to obtain answers to personal questions or problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, to share common passions or to play.

Meghalaya is a land of one community inhabited by the three main tribes. They are the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. The Khasi and the Jaintia Tribes, known as Khyntiam and Pnar, are unitedly called by one name—"Hynniewtrep or Seven Huts." It is generally considered by many Khasi sociologists that the Khasi tribe consists of seven sub-tribes, hence the title 'Children of the Seven Huts': Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and Diko. The Khasi people formed the majority of the population of the Eastern part of Meghalaya, and is the state's largest community, constituting 48% of the population of Meghalaya (Mawlong, E. (1980).

Role of Women Organizations in Meghalaya

The Role of CSWO: The Civil Society Women Organization is one of the most influential women organizations in Meghalaya. The objectives of the organization are to find out various problems concerning women, children and youth other societal problems and human rights issues. As a womens, organization, they are concerned about crimes against women and domestic violence

which are the major problems faced by women in Meghalaya. The organization is a welfare organization and no specific issue is taken up by the organization. They take up issues that deprive the rights of the individual or the community, including men and women and promote the welfare of the people of Meghalaya. The Civil Society Women Organization is also concerned with issues of human rights and corrupt practices in any form or any hindrances towards progress and development. The presence of women and student organizations in Meghalaya has a great impact on the development of democratic rule in the state. This enables the different departments of the government to avoid corrupt practices at all levels. The presence of Civil Society Women Organization in Meghalaya has increased the security of the people, women in particular. The discrimination against women in the form of domestic violence, rape cases and kidnapping have been highlighted from time to time by the organization and it has pressed the government to punish the guilty culprits persons involved in the matter. The Civil Society Women Organization and other Non- Governmental Organizations always oppose the wrong policy of the government. Sometimes strikes, bandhs and office picketing are organized to pressure the government to take up serious action on important matters. The Organization prevents specific forms of violence and discrimination against women. The Organization is also very active in opposing bail of the accused in cases of violence against women, particularly in cases of domestic violence, attacks etc. As an organization of women, the Civil Society Women Organization also consistently watches out for the violation of human and women rights across the state. The Organization also supports campaigns to influence public opinion, policies and legislation in support of a violence-free state for women.

Activities of CSWO: One of the issues that vehemently opposed by the organization was the Shillong prison break of (L) Full Moon Dhar. Fullmoon Dhar, a murderer was involved in the murder of two women by brutally cutting their throats. He fled from the Shillong District jail on the 31st May, 2009. The next day, Dhar was killed in an encounter with the police. The allegation of the Civil Society Women Organization against the police department and concerned authorities was that the death of Fullmoon Dhar was a fake encounter. Politician and businessmen were involved in financing the break. Under the leadership of Agnes Kharshiing as President, the CSWO works in collaboration with the Steering Committee against the Murder of Democracy, a conglomeration of Non- Governmental Organizations fighting for justice in the jail break case. Thus, the Civil Society Women Organization, the Steering Committee against the Murder of Democracy and Non-Governmental Organizations called for a night road blockade, followed by public curfew, pressuring the government to take up serious action on the matter (Fullmon Dhar,).

Another issue raised by the Civil Society Women Organization was the rape case which took place in the Marvalen Inn in 2017 where some men, including a politician had been involved in the issue and jailed (Mawlong, E 1980). The Civil Society Women Organization and other Non-Governmental Organizations pressured the government to take up serious action on the matter. The third issue raised by the Organization was the education scam in Meghalaya. In 2010, the education department of Meghalaya conducted the examination for teachers to fill up various posts in government lower primary schools across the state. Through the Right to Information the CSWO found that the marks of the candidates had been erased with white- ink. Most of the successful candidates' names had disappeared from the list. The Director of school education and literacy confessed that he had done it as a favour as requested by the higher authority. In this

regard, two officials of the Education Department and Education Minister have been charge-sheet by the CBI. The organization condemned the issue as one of the great corrupt practices in Meghalaya. The Civil Society Women Organization and other Non-Governmental Organizations pressurized the government to punish the persons involved and take serious action against the perpetrators. Besides, the organization performed a number of unaccountable functions for the improvement of the welfare of the people in Meghalaya. The rape cases in Meghalaya are high and the organization did not ignore each case, especially the evildoers. Interestingly, the organization always reminds the government to speed up punishment in case it neglects any matter (Education, Scam).

Khasi Women Welfare and Development Association: The Khasi Women Welfare and Development Association was formerly known as Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya. The working and objectives of the Khasi Women Welfare and Development Association was almost similar to that of the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya. The primary objectives of the Association on social issues are: 1. To protect Tribal land from the domination of the people from the plains, 2. To promote trade and commerce and reduce unemployment problems in the region. 3. To protect the tribal people from illegal migrants or foreigners, 4. To eradicate social evils such as drinking, drugs, corruption and many common problems and issues. With regard to political issues, the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya supports the clean politics campaign propagated by Ardent M. Basaiawmoit. The leaders of the organization argue that such campaigns were conducted in different villages for a corruption free government. Clean politics should start within the family. The organization also works in collaboration with other organizations regarding common issues (Clean, Politics).

Women in Meghalaya Politics: The role of women in the politics of Meghalaya is both significant and reflective of the state's matrilineal culture, particularly among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia communities. However, their participation in formal politics has historically been limited, contrasting with their influential role in society and traditional governance systems. Meghalaya's matrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance are traced through women, grants women a central role in family and societal affairs. The youngest daughter traditionally inherits property and is responsible for taking care of the family. Despite this, decision-making in traditional institutions, such as the Dorbar Shnong (village councils), is dominated by men, with women often excluded from leadership roles. Women's representation in the state legislature and parliamentary politics has been minimal. Since 1972, only a few women have been elected to the Legislative Assembly or to Parliament. Notable female politicians, such as Agatha Sangma, a former Union Minister and Member of Parliament, and Deborah Marak, a former minister in the Meghalaya government, have broken barriers, serving as inspirations for other women. While women in Meghalaya play crucial roles in societal and cultural spheres, bridging the gap between their societal status and political representation remains a challenge. Increasing their participation in politics could bring transformative changes to governance and development in the state. The representation of women in formal politics in Meghalaya, India, presents a unique paradox. While Meghalaya is a matrilineal society, where lineage and inheritance are traditionally traced through women, this cultural framework has not translated into substantial representation of women in formal political structures (Das, P, 2020).

Meghalaya, women often hold significant roles in family and community life. Despite this matrilineal structure, women have been underrepresented in state and national politics. Men dominate political decision-making and hold the majority of leadership roles in political parties and governance. Since its statehood in 1972, Meghalaya has had only a handful of women legislators in its State Legislative Assembly. The representation of women in national politics from Meghalaya has also been sparse. For instance, women candidates have rarely been elected as Members of Parliament from the state. In local governance, such as the Khasi Autonomous District Council or Garo Autonomous District Council, women's participation remains low.

Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972, and its political environment has always been intertwined with indigenous practices. The primary role of women was often seen in local governance and as influencers of social policy, rather than active political actors. The absence of women in leadership positions in mainstream politics during this period is notable.

The state of Meghalaya has often been viewed as a progressive region for women. However, political representation of women in the state tells a contrasting story. Despite the cultural norms favoring women in family and societal decision-making, their role in formal politics has been relatively limited. The study of the role of women in politics in Meghalaya is a fascinating area to explore, as it provides insights into the progress and challenges faced by women in the state's political landscape. However, their participation in formal politics has evolved significantly since Meghalaya became a state in 1972.

Role of Women in Grassroots Politics: Meghalaya's matrilineal society has allowed women to maintain strong positions in local governance, especially in village councils and local governing bodies like the District Council. Women have held powerful positions within these bodies, participating in decision-making processes concerning the allocation of resources, welfare programmes, and cultural preservation. This has empowered women in rural Meghalaya, though their influence is often confined to local rather than state-level politics.

Women in Leadership Positions: Political parties in Meghalaya, like those in other parts of India, have been slow to nominate women in significant positions. The region's unique cultural context has sometimes been a double-edged sword, where indigenous customs emphasize matrilineality, but mainstream politics has been traditionally male-dominated. Women candidates have faced difficulties in gaining electoral support due to socio-cultural biases and entrenched patriarchal systems (Syiemlieh, H, 1995).

Over the years, women have started assuming leadership roles, albeit gradually. The landmark achievement was the election of Mukul Sangma, a male chief minister, appointing women to key positions in his government, though women held lesser influential roles than their male counterparts. In recent years, however, women like Roshan Warjri, a member of the Indian National Congress, have carved a path in state politics (Sharma, R, 2018). Their participation in local bodies and assembly elections has provided a clearer picture of the growing role of women. Women like M. A. P. Lyngdoh, Maysalin War, Debora Marak, Mrs Irin Lyngdoh and Dr. Amparence Lyngdoh have made a mark on the political stage. While they have not held chief

ministerial positions, they played vital roles in representing women in the state's politics and working for greater representation and rights for women (Warjri, Antarwell, 2022;149).

The Government of India Act 1935 provided for the representation of women by the reservation of a seat from the Shillong constituency in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The Act also permitted women to contest from the reserved seats and general seats (Warjri, Antarwell, 2022;151-152). In 1937, Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was the first woman to become a member of the Legislative Assembly and was included in the Muhammad Saadulla's Ministry in 1939 till 1941 and again from 1942 till 1945. Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was the first lady to become a cabinet minister in North East India. In the 1946 elections, Mrs B. Khongmen was elected as the member of the Assembly. After Meghalaya attained full fledged statehood on January 21, 1972. The representation of women in the legislature lagged far behind. Electoral politics is still considered as the domain of men. The reason is that, women are always busy domestic work (Warjri, Antarwell, 2022;152-153). They mostly, spend time with their children and have no time to take part in public affairs. It appears that women themselves are not interested in contesting elections. This could be due to the fact that they are embedded in the traditional belief that politics is the arena of men only. Thus, the women of Meghalaya were not accepted as policy formulators and decision makers.

During elections, they participate in political campaigns such as processions, public meetings, public speeches and exercising their franchise. In some polling booths women voters exceed men. So far, from 1972 to 2018, only 18 women candidates have won in Meghalaya (Warjri, Antarwell, 2022;154). No doubt, women are at par with men in intellect. They are hardworking and sincere. If these qualities are utilized at the decision making level, if they come forward and assert themselves in politics and get represented in various legislative bodies, the role of women in politics in Meghalaya would have improved. In other fields, women in Meghalaya have played a very crucial role in promoting women rights and poor people in particular. Women activists such as Hasina Kharbhih, Agnes Kharshiing, Angela Rangad those of challenge the government if the state violates the people's rights. However, with the spread of education and influence of modernization, women are more conscious of their rights (Dkhar, M, 2016).

The early decades of statehood were marked by limited female representation in formal political structures, with societal norms and structural barriers restricting women's active engagement in decision-making processes. However, the latter decades of this period witnessed a gradual, albeit uneven, rise in the political participation of women. The increasing involvement of women in grassroots movements, pressure groups, and civil society organizations, particularly in addressing environmental concerns, social justice, and cultural preservation, highlighted their growing influence beyond conventional political roles. Prominent leaders and activists emerged as torchbearers, inspiring younger generations and challenging traditional gender roles. Despite these advancements, systemic challenges persisted. Women remained underrepresented in legislative bodies, and societal expectations often relegated them to support roles rather than leadership positions (Simon, Andrew, 2004; 31). Electoral dynamics, party politics, and economic constraints further limited their participation. Initiatives promoting women's education, economic independence, and leadership development proved instrumental in addressing some of these challenges, but gaps in policy implementation and cultural resistance remain. Fostering gender-sensitive political education, and addressing socioeconomic barriers are essential steps toward achieving gender equity in Meghalaya's political landscape. The evolving narrative of women's

political participation not only strengthens democracy in Meghalaya but also serves as a model for other states grappling with similar issues. It is imperative to build the foundation, ensuring that women's voices are not only heard but also lead the charge in shaping the region's future. The role of women has evolved significantly from limited involvement in the early years to gradually gaining prominence in the legislative and executive branches of government. However, full political equality remains a challenge, and there is still a need for more inclusive policies and practices to ensure women's equal participation and representation in politics. As of 2023, the political landscape of Meghalaya continues to be shaped by the contributions of women, who inspire future generations to actively participate in the democratic process (Joshi,H,G, 2004;291).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The role of women in politics of Meghalaya from 1972 to 2023 reflects both the cultural uniqueness of the region and the persistent challenges of gender equality in political representation. Meghalaya, with its matrilineal society, offers women significant social standing, but this has not translated proportionally into political participation and leadership. Women have been participated in various organizations and are entitled them to form Women Organization like Civil Society Women Organization and Khasi Welfare and Development Association. Women have been instrumental in shaping socio-political discourses, advocating for education, environmental protection, and community welfare. However, structural barriers such as entrenched patriarchy within political institutions, limited access to resources, and societal expectations have hindered their ascent to prominent political roles. Women have been participated in state politics (Nongrum, S, 2019). The period from 1972 to 2023 has witnessed gradual progress, with more women contesting elections and assuming leadership positions in government and civil society. Initiatives aimed at empowering women, along with the increasing visibility of female leaders in Meghalaya, indicate a slow but positive shift toward inclusivity. It is crucial to address systemic challenges by implementing gender-sensitive policies, fostering political awareness, and encouraging active participation of women at all levels of governance. By doing so, Meghalaya can fully harness the potential of its women leaders to contribute to the state's development and uphold its democratic ideals.

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