

Chapter 8

Women's Empowerment in Meghalaya

8.1 Introduction

Gender concerns were missing from early growth strategies since these generally did not consider the 'human factors' in development. Even the first Human Development Report (HDR) of the UNDP in 1990 barely touched on gender issues. It was the HDR 1995 that focused on gender inequality to tie in with the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It offered a much more elaborate analysis of gender issues and stated that the purpose of development was to enlarge all human choices, not just income. Therefore, it is important to understand gender in the context of Human Development.

'Gender' refers to the rules, norms, customs and practices by which biological differences between males and females are translated into socially constructed differences between men and women and boys and girls. This results in the two genders being valued differently and in their having unequal opportunities and life chances.

Mythology and tradition still carry the memory of the days when women were accorded a high position in the family and the community. It is not known when the sequence of civilization underwent an aberration and women were removed from a place of prominence in society to its shadows. Men declared themselves superior to women. Women accepted their secondary status without opposition. Today women are burdened with cumulative inequalities of centuries caused by social and cultural discrimination and injustice in a large part of known human history. Women are not given the same opportunities that men enjoy : personal growth and social development in education, employment, marriage and political life. In India, women are less likely than men to continue their education to higher levels and are more likely to be found concentrated in female occupations like teaching, nursing, social work, etc., all of which are of low status and low remuneration jobs.

However, at every turn in history, there were efforts to restore women to their due position. Thinkers and intellectual launched several campaigns, which declared that men and women were equals. In recent times, the United Nations has taken the initiative to address issues concerning women in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres at the international level.

International Perspective: Based on the reports of the Commission on the Status of Women for the twenty five years since its first session at New York in 1947 and a series of other resolutions, the UN General Assembly in its Resolution of 18th December 1972 proclaimed the year 1975 as the International Women's Year. Eventually, the four World Conferences on Women convened by the United Nations provided broad guidelines to member countries the world over for designing their course of action to bring about gender justice.

The First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975, the International Women's Year identified three key objectives that formed the basis of United Nations work on Women. These were (i) gender equality and elimination of gender discrimination (ii) integration and participation of women in development and (iii) increased contribution of women to world peace. 1976 – 1985 was declared the United Nations Decade for Women.

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 articulated the Bill of Rights of Women. But it did not take long for the world community to realize that mere conferment of legal status to various rights of

women does not ensure women's ability to exercise those rights. The Second World Conference at Copenhagen in 1980 identified equal access to education, employment opportunities and health care services to be the basic factors.

The Third World Conference at Nairobi in 1985 revealed the limited impact that the strategies followed during the United Nations Decade for Women had in improving the status of women and reducing gender discrimination. A new approach was called for in the Nairobi Forward looking Strategies to the Year 2000. Women's participation in decision-making was recognized not only as their legitimate right but also as a social and political necessity that would have to be incorporated in all institutions of society.

The Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995 marked a shift of focus from women to the concept of gender. For women to be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners with men in all respects of life, the entire structure of the society and all relations between men and women within it had to be re-evaluated. Gender equality must be recognized as an issue of universal concern benefiting all.

The Beijing declaration and Plan for Action (PFA) was an agenda for women's empowerment. The PFA identified twelve critical areas posing as major obstacles to women's advancement, which need concrete Government actions. These were:

(i) Women and poverty, (ii) Education and training of women, (iii) Women and health, (iv) Violence against women, (v) Women and armed conflict, (vi) Women and the economy, (vii) Women and power and decision-making, (viii) Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women, (ix) Human Rights of women, (x) Women and the media, (xi) Women and the environment and (xii) girl child.

By adopting Beijing Platform of Action our Government committed itself to the effective inclusion of a gender dimension throughout the institutions, policies, planning and decision-making.

National Perspective: At the National level, the issue of equality between men and women was incorporated in our political framework much earlier when our country adopted in the Constitution right to equality between men and women and universal adult suffrage after Independence in 1947. The government has enacted a number of laws to protect women, some of which are:

1. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
2. The Protection Against Sexual Harassment of Women Act, 2005
3. The Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994
4. The National Commission for Women Act, 1990
5. Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987
6. Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
7. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986
8. The Family Courts Act, 1984
9. Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1976.
10. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
11. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
12. Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.
13. Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956

14. The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939.
15. The Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act, 1937
16. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856.
17. Other Related Laws (Relevant Provisions).

The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and entitlements of women. The Constitution of India was amended to ensure adequate representation of women in local self government (73rd and 74th Amendments).

The Department of Women and Child Development and other bodies were set up for the betterment and upliftment of women. But what is needed most is the effective implementation of the laws and the proper functioning of various departments so that women are benefited. The year 2001 has been declared by the government as the year for Women's Empowerment.

India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing itself to securing equal rights of women. Key among them is the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ratified by the Government of India in 1993.

The Mexico Plan of Action 1975, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1986), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action 1995 and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality & Development & Peace for 21st Century titled "Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action" have been unreservedly endorsed by India.

Position of Women in the Country: While women of India shared many of their disabilities with women in the developed countries, their experience of discrimination was more extensive because of the sex-segregated character of the society, the conditions of poverty and the traditional value system. Women's education in India was limited to learning domestic skills and they had no access to positions of power. Marriage was almost a necessity as a means of support or protection. Pressure was constant to produce many children. A married woman usually took her husband's status and lived with his family with little recourse in case of ill treatment and non-support. As such, a woman had no legal control over her person, her own land and money or her children. The situation has improved today but gender equality is still a distant dream.

Women in North East region are better off compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. With the exception of the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, most societies in the region are patriarchal and patrilineal but as in other parts of the country women are also discriminated against in some of these societies. Important indications of development like education and nutrition levels are lower than those of men. They are often deprived of the right to inherit property and own land. Even widows cannot inherit the husband's property (In Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland only the ornaments gifted by the parents at the time of marriage can be owned and disposed by the woman as she pleases). However, social evils such as dowry and the purdah system of similarly organized societies in the east of India are, generally speaking, absent. The absence of the above practices in most North Eastern societies does not imply that the status of women in the region is high.

Looking at the status of women in the country and considering the efforts taken at the international and national levels to end gender inequality, it is important to examine and highlight the status of women in Meghalaya. If human development is defined as the process of enlarging people's choice, this chapter aims to examine the choices that the matrilineal societies in Meghalaya offer to its male and female members in enhancing their capacities; the changes that have set-in the society and

how these changes affect the social structure generally and the consequences in the individual roles and duties. Secondly, if the level of human development has a positive correlation with gender equity; we try to find out what level of gender equality matrilineal society offers and whether this affects human development and gender equality positively.

The rest of the chapter is organised as follows. Section 8.2 discusses the Status of women in Meghalaya. It examines the gender roles and responsibilities in the traditional matrilineal social structure of the state. The constraints of the system and changing gender roles are also highlighted. It also provides an analysis of some indicators of the status of women. Section 8.3 discusses certain schemes related to women empowerment. Section 8.4 concludes the chapter by offering some policy suggestions in this regard.

8.2 Status of Women in Meghalaya

8.2.1 GENDER ROLES IN THE TRADITIONAL MATRILINEAL SOCIAL-STRUCTURE IN MEGHALAYA

Women in Meghalaya are believed to be better placed and to have more autonomy than their counterparts in the rest of the country. Women are respected, honoured and placed in a high position. There is a Sanskrit saying “where women are respected, there the gods dwell”. This is true of Meghalaya where women are given the rightful place with honour and dignity in the home, class and the society. Another feature of the society in Meghalaya is that women are free from many of the social restraints of the larger Indian society. There is no caste system, untouchability or social inequality.

This is so because the three major tribes of Meghalaya – The Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos follow the matrilineal structure of society. Matrilineal societies as widely understood confer more autonomy on women, as compared to patrilineal societies.

Box 8.1: Matrilineal System Defined

A MATRILINEAL SYSTEM OF SOCIETY IS A SYSTEM WHERE:

- A descent or lineage is traced from the mother. Children take the family name of the mother.
- Right to Inheritance of family property goes to the daughters.
- Residence after marriage is uxorilocal.

Women have the right over their children by dint of the matronymic principle. Women enjoy property rights, but in most matrilineal societies men exert control over their sister's or niece's property. Women also directly or indirectly participate in the socio-religious and socio-political activities in their social set-up. Generally, the public-domain is directly under men's control, but men succeed to traditional political offices via the female line, i.e., brother to sister's son or sister's daughter's son. Performance of socio-religious rites and ceremonies are in the hands of males, but conventionally arranged in a specified household of the female clan member. Thus, in matrilineal societies, men and women have certain rights, privileges and functions, accorded by traditional practices, thereby contributing to the continuity of the social structure.

Meghalaya is the homeland of the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos whose matrilineal social

structure is persisting since time immemorial. In both societies, descent is traced through the female line and perpetuation of the group is through the matronymic rule. Inheritance of property is also through the female line. Although succession to the traditional political offices is through the female line, it is the males who actually succeed, for example, the office of *U Syiem* (Chief) among the Khasis, *Doloiship* (chief) among the Pnars (Jaintia) and *Nokmaship* (chief) among the Garos.

Clan is the basic unit of Khasi and Garo social structure. The incessancy of the clan devolves on women. Reproductive role of women is acclaimed and there are many rituals for the expecting mother and a safe delivery of the child (Mawrie: 1981). Woman as mother is the pivot of the family. She is responsible for the socialisation of children in the family. In Khasi society, an issueless woman is ridiculed as *lap-Duh* (Extinct-line). Even if perpetuation of the clan depends on women, Khasi society frowns upon an issueless man alike. A special ceremony is performed for the members of the clan who died without an issue (Gurdon, 1974). This ceremony is a symbolic obviation of childlessness. The role of both the sexes in procreation is considered significant for the continuity of the group.

A Khasi man had two major roles to play, viz., *U Kni* (maternal uncle) and *U Kpa* (father) in his family of orientation and procreation respectively. A man's obligation and duties was ambivalent, particularly if he is the eldest maternal uncle. He owes obligations and duties towards his mother and sisters being the manager who looks after the family's property, also as the priest who presides over the family rituals. The maternal uncle has an important role in the upbringing and welfare of the sister's children too, besides his socio-economic and socio-religious duties to his lineage members. As a husband and father, he is the provider and protector to his wife and children. The conflicting roles between that of a maternal uncle and husband were minimized in the traditional Pnar society who practiced the 'visiting husband system' in the past. Among the Garo, the prescriptive cross-cousin marriage (Father's sister son) for the heiress, and the management of the corporate property by the Nokma (heiress's husband) guarded the ambivalent roles. The father is the provider among the Khasi and Garo families with the exception of the Pnar in the past. Das Gupta (1981) states that the position of a husband in the War Khasi family is much higher compared with that of the Khyntiam Khasi. The main reason of a higher position of a husband in a War Khasi family perhaps is due to the fact that among them sons also inherit the parental property unlike the Khyntiam Khasi.

In the agrarian society, the clan or lineage serves as an important economic unit. Land as an important asset is within the control of the clan council, headed by the eldest maternal uncle. The inheritress/custodian of the clan-landed-property is the youngest daughter among the majority of the Khasi-Pnar. The eldest daughter among certain section of the War Khasi inherits the clan property. Among the Garo, property of the machong passes to any chosen daughter. The inheritress acts as a custodian of the clan property. While the manager is the eldest maternal uncle among the Khasi-Pnar, the Nokma (husband of the inheritress) among the Garos has full control and manages the property inherited by his wife. Neither the inheritress nor the manager has the power and authority over the use and disposal of clan property, because other members of the lineage have a say. The manager can, however, influence any decision as the adviser of the lineage in general. In the past society when clan-land was abundant and people depended on it for their livelihood, the role of the maternal uncle in the clan council was significant. The council could distribute or allocate land whether for agricultural purposes, housing or otherwise.

The ancestral property passes from mother to daughter as stated above. Among the Garo, sons do not inherit property under any circumstances whatever (Playfair, 1975). While among the Khasi there is an exception to this rule, both male and female children among the War-Khasi inherit ancestral and acquired property in equal share, with the exception that the youngest daughter is given something in addition to her share (Gurdon, 1974). When it comes to self-acquired property of the family, at parental discretion, other children can inherit both male or female. The inheritress of

the lineage-property by dint of her privileges have more responsibilities and obligation to her family members. The house of the youngest daughter among the Khasi is looked up by the member of the matri-kin as a refuge in the midst of any contingency (Nongbri, 1996). Thus, on her rest the obligation of looking after the parents, house the orphans of her sisters and shelter her divorced/separated brother and sister. The right to property is equally complement by her social duties.

The rights and privileges of the youngest daughter and maternal uncle in Khasi society extend to socio-religious activities. The youngest daughter is also regarded as the holder and keeper of religion (*Ka bat ia ka Niam*). Her house is known as the foundation house (*ka ing-seng*). It is here that members of the family assembled for family rituals and propitiation of ancestors and ancestress, or other ritual relating to the family and its members. She prepares the articles for the rituals (Gordon, 1987, Marwein, 1981). The actual rites may be conducted by the maternal uncle or by the diviner (*Nongknia*) or by the priest (*Lyngdoh*) ordained from a particular lineage or clan. The traditional death rituals are very elaborate among the Khasi-pnar. It is conducted in many stages, and it is usually in the house of the youngest daughter that these important rites take place. Among the Garo the office of the priest (*Kamal*) is not confined to any particular clan, anybody may assume the duties if he can memorize the incantations (Playfair, 1975). In the socio-economic and socio-religious institutions the youngest daughter and maternal-uncle hold significant rights, privileges and duties among the Khasi-Pnar.

The political and administrative affairs are considered men's domain in the traditional set-up both in Khasi and Garo societies. Unlike the Ashanti women in Ghana (Rattray, 1969), women in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya have no active roles in the public domain. Khasi women were barred from attending any of the councils (*durbar*) be it at the village or state level. The simile- *ynda kynih ka iar kynthei, ka pyrthei ruh lawai* (meaning when the hen crows the world is nearing its end) and *ksan rympei rem dorbar*, (meaning a winner in the family a loser in the council) - repudiates women active participation in politics. These sayings insinuated that though women are pivotal in the affair of the family and clan, men are decision-makers in the public-sphere. Women have no direct role in politics, albeit succession to political offices is through the female line i.e. from the current *Syiem* to his sister's son. The office of the State-priesthood (*Syiem-sad*), which is accorded to the *Syiem's* mother or eldest sister, is a token of female participation in the religious nature of Khasi-Pnar traditional political set-up (*Syiemship*). Through this office, political status of women is symbolically ensured. It is also through this office that the *Syiem-sad* performs has a role in state rituals, as well as advises on the appointment of the next chief. She is entrusted with the custody of rites and ceremonies of the states "in order that her moral force may serve as a restraining hand, a power behind the throne" (Lyngdoh, 1989). This political office of *Ka Syiem Sad* is observable till date in the annual Nongkrem festival. The role of the maternal uncle and youngest daughter is being replaced by that of *Syiem* (chief) and *Syiem-Sad* (state-priestess) in the socio-political domain. The office of *Nokmaship* among the Garo is derived by being the husband of an inheritress. This post passes from the present Nokma to his sister's son. Garo women are allowed to attend the village council, but have no voice in it.

The above paragraphs highlight the rights and duties of the key figures in Khasi-Pnar and Garo societies. Nakane (1967) terms the youngest daughter and the eldest maternal uncle as the 'Pair-status' who perform the socio-economic and socio-religious roles within the family and lineage, in accordance with the norms laid down by the society. This term can be extended to the *Syiem* and *Syiem-sad* who perform the traditional socio-political and state rituals. Among the Garo the two key figures or pair-status, who perform socio-economic, socio-religious and socio-political duties in the societies are the *Nokna* and her counterpart the *Nokma*, who manages the corporate property and head the political office as the village chief.

Nakane (1967) pointed the conflicting gender roles in Khasi matriliney. She elaborates the problems faced by the eldest maternal uncle and the youngest daughter. She refers to the subordinate position of the man who marries an heiress and also to the problems encountered by a woman who marries the maternal uncle, who is the man of authority in his respective lineage and clan. According to her, this is one of the reasons for the high rate of divorce and separation in the Khasi society. The position of man as a husband is stable and better-off if he marries a non-heiress. A woman who marries a non-authority man gets the full support of her husband both socially and economically. The role of the maternal uncle in such a family also declines. Nongbri (1996) reiterates the above view when she states that “Khasi kinship imposes a dual loyalty upon men”.

Khasi and Garo matrilineal social-structure is similar at the general level of basic rule of descent, succession and inheritance; the line passes from mother to daughter and mother’s brother to sister’s son and the fact that property is inherited by the female. Besides, male manages the property and the clan council has the power and authority over it. The divergence or structural difference lies in the composition of the property-controlling group. The asymmetry of both societies is also reflected in the pairing of the key-figures in the society - their rights, duties and obligations, the kind of problem encountered by them, besides other cultural practices (Pakyntein, 2000).

Examining the gender roles in the matrilineal societies in Meghalaya one cannot ignore the complementary nature of the structured roles. The traditional gender roles have been construed in a way that men and women could not function in isolation. The foci of roles on the youngest daughter and the eldest maternal uncle indicated the complementary nature of the position of men and women in the family and lineage - the basic units of the Khasi social-structure. If the younger brothers have no authority the other elder sisters have no property. In Garo societies the roles of Nokna and Nokma complement each other. The functions of one depend on the reciprocal roles and duties of the other, but as clan members every individual has rights and duties. The cementing bond in the social structure of both Garo and Khasi-Pnar largely depends on the ‘key-roles’ assigned to the ‘key-figures’ in the society, and these function at the family and lineage. The structural-gender roles at present continue, but need to be redefined and reformulated with the changing times.

However, it is important to note that the relatively high status of women in Meghalaya also entails higher responsibilities for a woman.

Box 8.2: Women’s Responsibilities in the Traditional Matrilineal Society of Meghalaya

- Inheritance to ancestral property as the custodian of property for taking care of her aged parents, childless sisters of the same natal home, children of sisters if any of her sisters die and maternal uncles and brothers.
- Performance of the rites and rituals of the family and even the clan.
- Since women inherit property and have control of economic activity, women are socially and economically independent. As such, women’s responsibilities in economic, social and cultural development of the society are overemphasized.

Thus, the inheritance of the property implies a host of responsibilities and strict adherence to norms laid down under the system among the Khasis and the Jaintias and the position among the Garos is perhaps worse still.

8.2.2 CONSTRAINTS OF THE SYSTEM

Against the background of the matrilineal society outlined in sub-section 8.2.1 above, the women in Meghalaya appear to have a distinct role and status, as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. But this is a misconception, because in actual practice a woman can be stripped of the right of inheritance in the event of her failure to conform to the code of conduct accepted by the society or to fulfil her responsibilities to her natal home. Women shoulder many responsibilities without or with little access to real power.

Box 8.3: Women's Power in actual practice

- Women are not the heads of the family. They are under the control of the male member – Husband, Father or brother.
- Women inherit the parents' property acquired and ancestral.
- Women get the better share as the custodian of the property and the keeper of the home and hearth.
- For women coming from poor or landless families these property rights are meaningless. However, their responsibilities are no less than their landed counterparts.
- Women have no right to sell the property without the knowledge of the male member - her uncle, her brother or her father.

Further the impression and generalization that all women inherit property is no more relevant in the present economic condition in the society and in the State as a whole. Pascal Malngiang in his seminar paper opines as follows: "Empirically speaking, it will not be wrong to say that such properties are found to be in small quantities. It is quite evident that there are families and clans in the rural areas who do not have any land of their own to cultivate. Amongst them, there are many who have to depend on daily earning or wages. Similarly, a large proportion of population in urban areas does not have either a land or a house of their own. There are also members of big families who either have just a small house with no compound or land. We also witness a number of married women including the youngest daughters who have to stay in rented houses. Thus, the question of inheritance and property rights today can be classified into two categories the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

Though in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya women are free from many of the social restraints and problems of the larger Indian society like dowry, bride burning, female foeticide, neglect of girl child and other evils; the society has other problems like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, high dropout rates, early marriages, broken marriages and divorce. Women have been subsumed to be weaker physically as well as mentally by the society. This has led many women to bear violence in multiple forms silently within the four walls of their homes. Even in a matrilineal society, homes are not free of domestic violence with consequential effects on women and children. Family violence is a cognizable offence but very few women take advantage of it due to ignorance of the legal rights and provisions.

Another aspect of social life that is rearing its ugly head in our society is the marital discord.

Cases of divorce, legal separation and separation have increased too much. The grounds for divorce range from adultery, bigamy, physical and mental torture, desertion to maladjustment. Today strenuous life has made partners intolerant towards each other. More women have learnt to be more assertive making the institution of marriage vulnerable. Such a situation affects children, affects society adding to social problems.

Women outside home can still end up exploited. Women can be exploited at work place with exploitation being more by women illiteracy and lack of education. Exploitation is there where salary and wages as well as working conditions are concerned. There is no platform to voice their grievances with no one to air to the effects of work on her family and health. Sexual harassment at work place has not been reported more often simply because of inhibition on the part of the victims. Against such things women need protection.

Like other tribal social life of North East India, traditions and customary laws mostly regulate social life in Meghalaya too. Most of the customary laws and practices are based on gender considerations and prejudices against women are seen as acceptable to women themselves. Even the oldest Khasi Myths contained gender disparities. The *Durbar* is the traditional institution at the village level. Traditionally, women were restricted from attending *Durbar* unless specifically called for a specific purpose. It has been considered abnormal for women to air their views and voice their opinions in public matters among Khasis and Jaintias. Among the Garos for instance, women are not allowed to hold the position of *Nokma* and for Khasis the position of headman and the Jaintias the position of *Dalois*. They are still to get a place in representing the women's issues in the local *durbar* and of electing its traditional heads where only male members are eligible to participate in the election. This is of course taking a different turn in urban areas. In the political arena, participation of women as candidates is still receiving a luke-warm attitude of the male members in particular and the society in general.

In the absence of codified law it is the women who are most affected. In the changing demands of the society, the customary laws and practices need to be reconsidered, modified and changed. Social as well as cultural patterns of conduct of both genders need modification to remove prejudices against women. Fear of change traditions and customary laws lead to stagnation of society. Women themselves can take a positive step in this direction.

8.2.3 CHANGING SOCIETY AND GENDER ROLES AT PRESENT

The change in the social order has come forth over the years due to external social and economic influence (religions, modernity, access to outside world, polarized family, etc.) besides its inherent shifts in family and social power structure.

The natives of Meghalaya have had a long contact with the outside world. The Khasis came into contact with the people in the plains of Bengal (Hindu and Muslim) for trade and commerce very early in their history. The contact of the Khasis with the Hindus influenced certain sections of the people notably the War of Shella area, on the present Bangladesh border. Many adopted the Hindu religion, and a fraction of the population follows the Hindu religion till date. The contact of the Pnars with the Hindu culture dates back to the 15th century, when the Jaintia *Syiem* made Jaintiapur the winter capital and Nartiang the summer capital of Jaintia Kingdom (Bareh, 1967). The *Syiems*

of *Sutnga* in Jaintia Hills were earlier called Hindu kings, as they have adopted Hindu names, rites and ceremonies (Mathur, 1978). The Pnars in Nartiang village were directly influenced by the Syiem and have adopted Hindu beliefs and customs. In other parts of Jaintia-Hills a small number of Pnars have been converted to Hinduism. The Khasi first came into contact with the Muslims around the 17th century, when Muslims began paying occasional visits to the Khasi Hills as wanderers, traders, fortune tellers and in other capacities. Many of them settled in the hills and adopted Khasi customs (Bareh, 1967). During and after the British rule a number of Muslims from other parts of undivided India migrated to Assam and settled down for trade and employment (Mathur, 1979). Some of them married Khasi women, and became propagator of Islam among the Khasi.

The British occupation in this part of the country during the early 19th century brought about profound impact on many aspects of culture and tradition. Major changes occurred with the organized effort of the Western missionaries who worked hard to proselytizing and introducing formal education to the local people. Thus, British occupancy of this area brought about a chain of changes in administration, religion, education, economy, modernization, development in communication and so on. After the post-independence period more changes occurred in the society's politico-administrative set-up and socio-economic life. These combined factors affect many aspects of traditional institutions, the normative roles of the individuals, and the society at large. Thus, the rights, privileges and duties of both men and women need to be redefined in the present context. The traditional matrilineal structure is resistive to the changes and the basic structure endures till date.

Perpetuation of the clan is the vested role of women and changes in the society have not impinged on this sacred duty. Motherhood continues to be an ideal image for women, in order that the group may survive. Inter-community marriages in a multi-cultural urban setting, however enable men to contribute to the continuity of their respective clan. A majority of the children of Khasi males, who are married to non-khasi women, take their father's clan name; a few of them undergo through the traditional (and revived) ceremony of *Tang-Jait*, meaning incorporation of the new clan into the Khasi society. Besides, a few Khasi families (Khasi to Khasi marriage) take the father's clan instead of the mother's. Thus, at present, a handful of males contribute to the reproduction of clan-members, which was impossible in the past (Pakyntein, 1996).

There has been a major reorganization and redefinition of men's role as a result of the changes in the society's belief-system, economy, modernization and contact with other cultures. The Christian doctrine that a woman should submit to her husband, fortified the status of man as a husband and father. The concept of the father as the bread earner of the family is a relatively new concept. In the traditional Pnar society, men do not contribute economically to their family of procreation, they earn for the mother's/sister's family. In the past, a Khasi man who married an heiress lived in the shadow of the maternal uncle and other members of his wife's family, since he resided uxorilocally. A man who married a non-heiress had a comparatively stable socio-economic position in his family of procreation, residing in a nuclear family. Modernization and urbanization opens the gate to various means of livelihood, such as white-collar salaried jobs and a range of other occupations. Trade and commerce flourishes with the introduction of cash economy. People need not depend only on agricultural activities. The new economic opportunities bolster men's socio-economic position in the family, as compared to the traditional substantive-economy, where men have to cultivate the land owned by his wife or her lineage. At present, whether a man marries an heiress or not his position is reinforced, especially when the family depends on his income for meeting the needs of the family.

The role and position of the maternal uncle also needs to be redefined. The emphasized role of man as a father and husband weakened the position of the maternal uncle in his sister's family. Respect is accorded to the maternal uncle, yet his position needs to be appraised vis-à-vis the sister's husband, in respect to economic status, educational status, morality, etc. Among the Christians, the

duty of maternal uncle as family priest has become obsolete with the formal priest performing the rituals. The increasing population diminishes the size of clan property, and pushes the clan members to migrate elsewhere in search of better economic opportunities. This in turn vanquishes the role of maternal uncle in controlling the clan property resources. All these factors enhance the role of the father in the family. The pull between the avuncular and paternal authority has led to the emergence of the mother figure as a dominant personality in the family (Nongbri, 1996).

The rights and duties of the youngest daughter ka *Khadduh* in Khasi society have been affected by the various factors of change. She continues to inherit the family property and has more control and authority over it, not only because the position of the maternal uncle is weakened, but the emergence of cash economy and private ownership, changes the concept of property itself. Many legal-battles have been fought over the mismanagement (sale) of ancestral property by the youngest daughter or/ and her husband, or at times by the maternal uncle. The religious role, of the younger daughter, like that of the maternal uncle, is relegated among the Christians. Her house is no longer the pivot where lineage members revolve for family rituals. It became a centre for social bonding instead of a centre for socio-economic and socio-religious activities. In the past, the socio-economic and socio-religious roles of the youngest daughter were complementary to those of the maternal uncle. Her position is enhanced with the weakened position of the maternal uncle. The socio-economic status of the youngest daughter's and/or her husband may influence their position in the family relationship and the society as a whole. In addition, educational status, economic opportunities and general urban way of life may strengthen her position or undermine it. Thus, the youngest daughter has control over the resources and capital, or can have access to capital because she owned property. This is true not only in the case of the youngest daughter but to other women who owned property through inheritance or accumulate property through their own labour.

In the agricultural society, the concept of non-working does not really exist; men, women and even children are allocated with specific economic duties. Modern economic life especially in the urban areas and changing life style introduces the concept of 'house-wife'. Women who are labelled as 'house-wives' do not consider themselves better-off in status, as compared to the working-women. Such women shy away from the community life unless they are well-educated or have substantive economic asset and status to back them up. Thus, non-working women have less decision making power in the family and a man as a bread earner in such a family has more power, authority and decision-making.

Among the Christian women participate actively as members of their respective churches. However, women basically perform supplementary roles in the functioning of the church. Thus, women are more involved in the extension-activities and social services such as education, health, charity and a host of other activities. Christianity, Hinduism or Islam, has been embraced by the Khasi-Pnar people in varying degrees and proportions. These religions, no doubt, have a patrilineal flavour in them, and this in turn influences not only the people who practice any such religion but also the society at large.

In the traditional belief, ka *Niam Khasi* and *Niam-Tre*, leaders realise that it is imperative to be more organized in their religious activities. This gives rise to the organization of *Seng-Samla Khasi* (1899), which was later retitled as *Seng-Khasi* (1901). This organization started its youth-wings, viz., Ka Seng Samla (1922) and Ka Seng Pyni (1973), which function like a Sunday school. Thus, the traditional religious institutions have become more formal and organized. Direct participation in the structure and its functioning is open to women, but men are the core organizers and functionaries. Women's role and position in the indigenous or non-indigenous religions are secondary in nature. Although women have minor duties in the traditional rites and ceremonies, the men are the religious specialists.

Women's roles are indirect and insignificant in the traditional political system. This holds true in the present day traditional institutions of *Syiemship*, *Doloiship* and *Nokmaship* among the Khasi-Pnar and the Garo, respectively. Among the Khasi-Pnar, succession to the political office remains in the female line, whereas among the Garo the Nokma continues to be the head of the village. The traditional village councils practiced male- suffrage, women could not attend such council in the past. At present, women are able to make a dent in almost all village councils in urban areas and few village-councils in rural areas. Unlike in the past women are allowed to attend such councils *Dorbar Shnong*. In the urban areas and many villages in Meghalaya, women are co-opted or nominate as office bearers or executive members of the village councils. It is note worthy to observe that women are not able to penetrate or carve a place in the traditional political set-up of *Hima*, *Doloiship* or *Nokmaship*.

Under the British rule, women were given the right to vote through the government of India Act 1935. This act also provides for reservation of women to the State Assembly. Thus, two women, Miss Mavis Dunn and Mrs. Bonnily Khongmen, were elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly before independence of the Country from foreign rule (Lyngdoh, 1997).

In the free India Republic, the Constitution of India not only confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres; but it is also very clear about discrimination against the weaker sections in the society. Besides, it empowers the state to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women and children. Representation of women in hardcore electoral politics is however, negligible and their presence is hardly felt.

Women do participate actively in modern politics both at regional and national levels. During election, they participate in political campaign; such as procession, public meetings, giving public speeches and other works. Women turn out in large numbers to exercise their franchise and women voters exceed that of men in some polling booths many a times. However, if women are not elected to the State Legislature and District Councils, this would "deprive them of being involved in the policy making decision" (Lyngdoh, 1997).

8.2.4 EMERGING ISSUES IN THE MATRILINEAL SYSTEM OF MEGHALAYA: ENIGMATIC QUERIES

The previous sub-section highlights the traditional matrilineal structure in Meghalaya the rights, freedom and responsibilities of men and women, as well as the constraints within it. This is followed by a brief discussion on the changing society including changing roles of men and women. If gender role and status are affected by various factors, and if gender-roles need to be refocused and redefined; what would be the societal responses to the same?

Khasi and Garo matrilineal societies have been resilient to the religious, economic and political changes. Khasi matriliney has its own dynamic system of descent and succession from time immemorial, and has been adapting itself to the changing times. Matronymic rule and female inheritance are still the norms followed by a majority of the people till date. Inheritance of property by the converts had been challenged in the 19th century. During the initial stage of Christianisation, many converts were disinherited. When the youngest daughter embraced Christianity, her rights to inheritance were opposed by family members on the ground that she no longer performed her socio-religious duties (Dutta, 1982). In 1850, Lord Dalhousie passed an Act to safeguard the rights of the converts throughout India. As a result, the opposition to inheritance by the converts gradually diminished. Muslim Khasis, on the other hand, have reverted to Muslim law of inheritance except in a few cases (Mathur, 1979). The youngest daughter is treated at par with other daughters and she does not get any preferential treatment of ancestral property. However, most of the people preferred and followed the traditional pattern of inheritance irrespective of religious conversion.

The 1960s witnessed the birth of an organization known as *Ka Seng Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew*. Its main objective was to disseminate patrilineal descent, succession and inheritance. The protagonists of this movement published articles in the local papers and distributed booklets, organised seminar and discussions to propagate that matriliney is no more functional in the present day context. Members of this organization strived for a change in the inheritance pattern, i.e., from female to male. In 1978, the Meghalaya Youth Organisation demanded that women of Khasi-Pnar-Achik, who did not observe group endogamy, should be disinherited (Passah, 1988). In the same year, the *Durbar of the Hynniew Trep* reiterated and supported the above issue. It also demanded the Government to appoint the Inheritance Commission to investigate the existing laws of inheritance in Meghalaya. Accordingly, the government appointed the Law Commission to delve into the matter. The Commission proposed a Bill which was passed by the Meghalaya Assembly in 1984. This is known as the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Act 1984. According to this act, the parents can bestow their self-acquired property to children by the will system. The Act validates the traditional system of inheritance, when it comes to ancestral-property. Their movement to change the inheritance pattern was, futile because conventionally self-acquired property can be disposed of as per the wish of an individual.

The various forces threatening inheritance pattern could not have much impact on the traditional norms. At present, the ideal view concurrently among the people is that equality should prevail in sharing the property. It is, however, a different matter with respect to the operation of this ideal. Those who have property can distribute it to all children, but the youngest daughter still gets the parental house. Sons too get a share, if the parents have the resources, but the youngest daughter and other daughters generally get a preference over the sons. Again there are many instances where the youngest daughters are deprived of the property and the other daughters inherit it, possibly flouting the family norms. The reason for depriving of property could be marrying a person against the parents' wishes, incompatibility to stay uxorilocally or other reasons. In some other cases, the youngest daughter may relinquish her rights due to many reasons, such as inability to stay with the parents because of economic or other factors. At present, where there is no daughter, sons inherit not only the self-acquired property, but also the ancestral property.

It should be noted that equitable distribution of property can take place if parents have property and if lesser number of children are there to share it. The reality is, however, very different, an average family owns a house and the assets in it. Some may be having landed property, buildings etc. In urban areas some do not even own a house nor any land. Amongst the haves they have something to distribute, what will the have-nots distribute? The local population of the state is no doubt small but the "fertility rate in Meghalaya is the highest in the country" (IIPS, 2002). Meghalaya is also the state where family planning method is least adopted. The average number of children in a family is about six and the maximum is as large as fifteen children (Leonetti et al, 2005). The question that arises is how to fragment the property among those who own a house or a small plot of land only? Among the average haves too can equitable distribution take place when there are many to share, without compromising the quality or value of the property? When it comes to cash asset, no doubt equitable distribution is possible without compromising the value, but how many among the population have cash asset to distribute? A question to moot over is – Is a small family an option for equal distribution of family property at least? And if family property is equally distributed, will it reduce an inequitable distribution of economic resources in the society?

The matronymic principles have been threatened by a section of people who are inclined towards the patrilineal system. The part played by *Ka Seng Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew* has been highlighted in the preceding section. In the 1980s, *Ka Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai* was established and its members advocated patrilineal principles and urged others to follow. The members of the group follow the patronymic principles (Nongkynrih, 2005). At present one comes across a few Khasi

families (Khasi mother and father) who take the father's clan. Is patrilineal influence or inclination the cause? Besides, a number of Khasi families take the clan names of both parents - both among the children of Khasi parents and more so among children of the Khasi mother and non-Khasi father? In the former category, is this an acknowledgement of a father in a name? In the latter category is it for expediency? Or bridging the different cultural practices?

According to Khasi tradition, perpetuation of the clan is a vested role of woman, but men through the practice of *Tang-Jait* (the incorporation of the children from a non-Khasi mother into Khasi society by conferring on them and their descendants a Khasi title) play a part in the creation of a new clan. The revival of this tradition of *Tang-Jait*, in the last decade of the 20th century may, however, have its own reverberation in the future. The ceremony of *Tang-Jait* may invite non-genuine members who undergo through this ceremony for the sake of expediency. The Khasis and the Jaintias are the indigenous people of Meghalaya, besides the Garos, and the Government of India have bestowed on them the Scheduled Tribe status. Thus, a Khasi-Pnar has certain advantages from the government policies as well as from the cultural practices of the people. The system of incorporation as practised at present is a portage for becoming a member of the Khasi-Pnar community in a customary manner as defined within the cultural practices. It enables such members to become part of the society by following its socio-cultural and socio-religious practices. Revival of this tradition as it is conducted at present may raise paradoxical issues in the future.

The role and function of the clan and its council in the socio-religious and socio economic arenas have diminished considerably among the Khasi-Pnar and Garo, whether they follow the traditional belief system or not. In modern economy and polity, the clan and its council hardly have any functions to perform. Individual family or lineage (in a more limited definition) has more roles to play and power decision-making. Without doubt, traditional economy and polity persist, but have been countermanded by the modern ones. The function of the clan in the past revolved around the whole society and the life of individual members. Change in the religious, economic and political institutions results in new cultural practices, re-conceptualisation of the roles and duties of the individuals and the declining functions of the clan in the society (for details see Pakyntein, 1996). Migration from rural to urban areas or from one village to another in search of livelihood diminishes the kinship ties of the people. The unity and solidarity of the clan is dying. Its important function is the rule of clan exogamy which is adhered to strictly. In modern Garo society, the rule of clan exogamy is loosening (Burling, 1997). The question which arises is how far the Khasi-Pnar people can follow the rule of clan exogamy with matronymic rules existing side by side with that of patronymic ones? Will matrilineal descent persist? As for the Garo society, how the erosion of the rule of clan exogamy affects the clan and society generally? What are the mechanisms of defining who is a marriageable partner and who is not? With the declining importance of the clan as a basic functional unit in the society, the importance of family in regulating socio-religious and socio-economic duties of its member is enhanced. Modernization process, economic changes and modern way of life foster the growth of individualism. For example, the person who inherits the family property treats it as an individual one, and this many a time leads to legal battles between family or lineage members in modern times. A combination of factors affects the unity of the Clan members. Economic hardship and loosening kinship bonds are important factors that orphanage and old-age homes have arisen at present. A host of other factors, such as direct contact of the people with other neighbouring societies and cultures, the penetration of the global culture with the advancement in modern communication – transport, mass-media, the net, etc.- undoubtedly impinges on the perception of the individual's rights, duties, values, etc.

Like people in other parts of India and the world, the people in Meghalaya have their own modern social-ills in varying degrees and magnitudes – school dropouts, unemployment, alcoholism, drug-addiction, domestic violence, violence against women, trafficking of women and children, child labour, etc. It is a gigantic task to pinpoint the factors leading to such problems in the present

discussion. The issues faced by the people in this society are similar in a way to those faced by people all over the world, though they vary in degrees. Socio-cultural change is a process that is part and parcel of human society and culture. When human initiates change they aspire for a better future, but human innovation, initiation and invention brought about both positive and negative consequences. Therefore, as we are ready to accept the positive aspect of our ever changing world, we need to be ready to combat the negative issues that follow.

8.2.5 A DISCUSSION OF SOME INDICATORS OF STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEGHALAYA

The tradition, change and continuity in the matrilineal social structures of Meghalaya had been recounted in the preceding sections. In the backdrop of the discussion on the status of women in the State, it is important to highlight the ground realities of women in the context of human development. The present section briefly examines the state of human development in Meghalaya from a gender perspective.

Workforce participation and contribution to the economy: Meghalaya like other North-Eastern states in India as well as other Scheduled Tribe areas is slow in economic growth and development. Nearly 66 percent of the working population are cultivators and agricultural labourers (DES, 2005). Males and females work together in agricultural activities following their traditional practices of agriculture. 49 percent of males and 39 percent of females were in the rural labour force in 2001 (Refer to table 6.7 in Chapter 6). In urban areas, the percentage of women in the labour force is lower at 21 percent. However, female labour force participation in both rural and urban areas of Meghalaya is significantly higher than the all India level. In rural areas where agricultural and related activities dominate the actual contribution of women towards the economy is significant. The concept of work itself is differentiated as one which is outside the 'home', and with cash reward. Housewife as a concept of non-working women is a new phenomena arising out of the redefinition of what is work/employment in the urban economy. Household-chore is not taken as productive work and women spend a lot of time doing household duties. In the traditional economy, men, women and even children have well-defined roles in sustaining the livelihood of the family. The concept of non-working individuals arises due to changing society and economy in particular. Besides, women in both urban and semi-urban areas do not regard themselves as being gainfully employed, although they work at home in a variety of ways, viz., embroidery, tailoring, etc., to supplement the household income. Although women in Meghalaya contribute to the economy, yet their contribution to the family income in particular and to the society in general, is to a certain extent undermined. Majority of the agriculturists in the state follow the age-old method. Many cash crops are introduced but with rudimentary technology, the production level is very low. Low production and shrinking sizes of landholdings push more and more people away from their villages in search of larger and more productive lands away from their villages, or in search of other kinds of employment with cash reward.

In most tribal societies women's economic participation is a cognized fact. Khasi and Garo women are hard working in both rural and urban areas. Besides agricultural and related work, women directly participate in trading and as wage-labour. A few women also work in mines and others in construction related work. Women's percentage in the collar jobs is significant. Although, women's share is much less than men in the higher executive categories, women outnumber men in the lower ranks or clerical categories. With the increasing level of unemployment among the educated classes, both men and women venture into modern enterprises - gender related or gender neutral ones.

It may be noted here that higher participation of women in the labour force may be looked at from two aspects and the work participation rate itself will not convey whether women's welfare is improved or not with high participation. For poor and uneducated women, working or not working is not a choice. They have to work to support their families and their burden is actually more, since generally

they have to attend to domestic chores as well. With high level of fertility, this burden is compounded along with the psychological burden of seeing their children work and not attending schools. On the other hand, being a worker increases the independence and decision making power of the women within their respective households. For educated women who can command higher wages in the labour market, higher participation in the labour force definitely increases their welfare and has a direct relation with women's empowerment.

Educational attainments: As discussed in Chapter 4, Meghalaya's performance in respect of literacy is below the national average. The all India literacy rate for the year 2001 is 75.85 percent for males, 54.16 percent for females and 65.38 percent for both males and females. The literacy rate in Meghalaya is 66.14 percent for males, 60.41 percent for females and 63.31 percent for both males and females. In comparison to other North-Eastern States, Meghalaya's position is second from the bottom next to Arunachal Pradesh. However, female literacy rates in Meghalaya are higher than the all India female literacy rates. The gender gap is significantly lower in Meghalaya.

With regards to school enrolment, female enrolment rates relative to males are higher in East Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi, Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. It appears that the notion that education for boys is not considered important since they will leave their parental homes for their wives' homes is still prevalent to some extent in the matrilineal societies of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The gender gap in enrolment in the three districts of Garo Hills is negligible (refer to chapter 4, table 4.11).

Health¹ : The state of women's health and well-being left much to be desired. Women in Meghalaya are second to Himachal Pradesh only, when it comes to decision making about their own health care; but the state of women's health is very poor as revealed by the National Family Health Survey-III (2005-06).

Malnutrition has an inter-generational impact, particularly on girls and women. It is directly and indirectly related to high mortality and morbidity rates. Maternal nutrition is important in determining obstetric outcome. A girl child that has been born of a malnourished and sick mother is at a great risk of underdevelopment not only in her physical but also in social life. She will tend to be ignored due to her poor health or be left at home to tend her siblings while she should be going to school like any child of her age. Hence, the vicious cycle continues of that child to bear sickly children and be herself at risk of all morbidities and mortalities associated with women.

Anaemia is a major health problem for adults as well as in children. It affects 55 percent of women and 24 percent of men in India. In Meghalaya too the problem is serious albeit with less gender differential. It affects 45.4 percent of ever married women aged 15-49 and 34.2 percent of ever married men aged 15-49 in Meghalaya. 56 percent of pregnant women in Meghalaya are anaemic. This leads to high prevalence of anaemia among children. A summary measure of nutritional status is the Body Mass Index (BMI). In Meghalaya 14 percent (36 percent in all India) of ever married women have BMI below normal.

Reproductive health of women in Meghalaya is also very poor in comparison with the national average or other states in the North-East. The contraceptive prevalence rate for currently married women is the lowest at 24 percent in Meghalaya among all the states in India. The national average is 56 percent. Unmet need for family planning among currently married women is 13 percent for the country as a whole. It is highest in Meghalaya with 35 percent among all the states.

Women in Meghalaya have very little knowledge of contraceptive methods. Is education (low

¹For detailed indicators of women's health, see chapter 3.

female literacy rates) responsible for poor health of women in Meghalaya? And if women's education is low, to what extent it affects the health status of the general population and children in particular? Under five mortality in the state is very alarming at 122 per thousand, it is above the national average of 95 per thousand, (IIPS, 2000). Female education is understood as a vital factor responsible for the decline in birth and death rates. It also improves the health, nutritional status and well-being of population (Khongsdier, 2003). Education is not the only factor affecting people's health but it is of considerable importance in promoting health and prevention of illness. Other socio-economic and environmental variables too, play their part but education, especially female education, is imperative in building a healthy population.

Violence: Statistics in terms of crime against women, viz., rape, molestation and abduction are also on the rise when we compare data for the years 1991 and 1998. In 1991 there are 27 cases of rape, 17 cases of molestation and 5 cases of kidnapping and abduction. In 1998 Meghalaya recorded 42 cases of rape, 12 cases of molestation and 16 cases of kidnapping and abduction (Planning Commission, 2002). Meghalaya also records the highest in domestic violence according to the National Family Health Survey- II, (1998-99). It is surprising when one relates women's experience in the beatings or physical mistreatment. Of the surveyed women, 31.1 percent reported maltreatment, which is the highest in North-East and second in India (national average is 21 percent). Yet the percentage of women who were beaten or physically mistreated in the year preceding the survey is only 9.6 percent compared with the national average of 11 percent. Whatever may be the percentage, it indicates that violence against women knows no structural barrier - whether in patrilineal or matrilineal society - women are victims of violence.

In Meghalaya, the instance of family discord and broken homes seem to be on the increase. Alcoholism is still the bane of our society, which causes domestic violence and breaking homes. Families with single parents are many. It is always the mother who has to fend for the family when a home breaks. Violence against women and children is perceived especially when the husband is prone to drunkenness.

Governance: The last indicator for monitoring progress and gender equality and women's empowerment relates to the number of seats held by women in State Legislature and Parliament. This refers to the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) introduced by the UNDP². Representation of women in the State Legislature and in Parliament continued to be very low. Studies have however, shown that the unwillingness of the political parties to field women candidate is one major reason. The overall environment faced by women both in and outside the household is also identified to be a very pertinent reason. Women who can create independent space for themselves are more likely to be active participants in politics (Chibber, 2004).

Whereas decision-making position in public institutions and other non-political bodies may be attainable through education, training skill development etc, political decision-making positions may not be achieved even with such efforts. Hence, over time although, a marginal improvement in the rate of women's participation in managerial and administrative bodies is observed, the same is not true in the case of elected bodies. In the case of political decision-making, women's unwillingness, lack of awareness, low level of literacy among women, lack of command over resources are cited as some reasons.

Meghalaya is no exception. When it comes to public life, the mindset and long-held views and attitudes about women still pose a major obstacle for women to enter electoral politics. Authority

²Due to data constraint we have not been able to calculate the GEM in Meghalaya..

in its real sense is the exclusive preserve of men. They are the sole inheritor of power. Politics and Administration are considered the prerogatives of men. A Headman inevitably heads the Village level traditional administration called *Durbar*. Thus, this level of administration is completely under the domain of men. As discussed in the preceding subsections above, women are restricted from attending *Durbars* unless specifically called for specific purposes when the services of women are required. While women have a say in household matters, men hold all major areas of decision-making.

In fact, in the history of the Khasis and Jaintias prior to the British period there were women rulers or queens, *Ka Latympang*, *Ka Priang Saring* of Jaintia Hills, *Ka Lar Syiem* of *Nobosophoh* and *Ka Lieh Nongkhlaw* (Mawlong, 2000) who were known for their Statesmanship and ability as rulers. Women participation is not of recent origin in Meghalaya. In 1935 prior to independence, the then Governor of Assam created a reserved seat, the Shillong Assembly Constituency, Assam. In the election held in 1937 two women candidates, *Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh* and *Berlina Diengdoh* contested the seat; the former won and became a minister in the Muhammad Sadullah Ministry from 1939 to 1941 and again from 1942 – 45. She was the first lady in the North East and the second in India to hold the office of a Minister. In the election held in 1946, *Mrs. Bonily Khongmen* won the seat. In the first general election in 1952, the Shillong Lok Sabha seat was contested by six women, two of whom were indigenous tribals, Mrs Bonily Khongmen came out victorious and entered Parliament as the first lady MP from the then state of Assam. Since then, there has been no lady MP from the state until 2008 when Shri P. A. Sangma's daughter, Agatha K. Sangma, was elected in the bye-election to the Tura Lok Sabha seat which became vacant when her father returned to state politics.

It would be befitting to trace the evolution of representation of women in the State from the first Assembly election. In Meghalaya, one or two women MLAs or MDCs (Member of Legislative Assembly and Member of District Councils, respectively) were elected from time to time. Since the time Meghalaya achieved its statehood (1972), only eight women were elected to the State Assembly, namely, Mrs. Percylina Marak (1972), Mrs. Miriam D. Shira (1978), Mrs. Maysalin War (1984, 1988), Mrs. Roshan Warjri (1993 and 1998), Mrs. I. Lyngdoh (2003), Mrs. D. Marak (2003), Jopsimon Phanbuh (who won the bye-election after the death of her husband in July, 2003) and Mrs. M. Ampareen Lyngdoh (2008). Women elected to the Autonomous District Councils too were very few.

So, political power is still eluding the women of Meghalaya except for very few. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment brought about the grass root system of governance on the Panchayati Raj with 33 percent of the elective posts reserved for women. The system has not been applied in Meghalaya, which falls under the Autonomous District Council created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Recently, there has been some move to usher in some modification in the Autonomous District Councils for their administration to be more direct with the people at the grass root level. Nothing tangible has yet come about. It would be a dim prospect to expect the incorporation of 33 percent reservation of seats and posts in the District Councils. The Bill was not passed when it was first introduced in 1996 and lapsed with the dissolution of the Eleventh Lok Sabha in December 1998. The Bill was re-introduced in Parliament as the 84th Constitutional amendment Bill in December 1999 & again as the 85th Constitutional amendment Bill on 11th August 2000 but has not been passed till date due to opposition from a few political parties.

Does Matriliney Promote Human Development? That a society is matrilineal or patrilineal is not reflected in educational and health outcomes of that society. States with higher literacy rates improve in health conditions, especially with respect to infant mortality. The correlation of literacy and economic variable is, however, weak. In agrarian societies, males and females participate almost equally in economic activities. In matrilineal societies, children belong to the mother –women who are separated/divorced or widowed more often head the family and have to fend for the children. Since separation and/or divorce are quite common, such women have to struggle more for bringing up their children.

Thus, women in matrilineal societies tend to work more due to social responsibilities. Incidence of child labour is also high probably because children belonging to such family set-up help their mothers in sustaining the needs of the family. Women in matrilineal societies have socio-economic responsibilities, although they are bestowed with property rights. Thus, property rights of women confer on them more economic duties, regardless of the fact that property exists or not.

The level of human development in Meghalaya is very poor as seen in Chapter 2 and the status of women in education and health is also bleak. It is interesting to note, that when it comes to Gender Disparity Index (GDI) and Gender Equality Index (GEI)³, attainment of women in Meghalaya is better compared to other states/union territories in the country. Its position is 12th in 1981 and 7th in 1991 (See tables 2.1 and 2.2 in Chapter 2), even if its position in HDI is 21st and 24th in 1981 and 1991, respectively.

Gender equality in Meghalaya as measured by the GDI or GEI is better because of greater participation of women in the economic activities and to some extent because of lower gender gap in school enrolment. It is not because of better female literacy or lesser female mortality. Thus, if female economic participation raises the level of gender equality in Meghalaya, despite the odds in education, health and also political participation, and if gender equality helps in elevating the level of human development in Meghalaya; We would expect the level of human development to be much better in the state if improvement is made in female literacy, female health status, overcoming to a certain degree the social-ills, such as child labour, crimes against women, poverty, alcoholism, etc.

8.3 Empowerment of Women

Empowerment of women as a concept was introduced at the International Women's Conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The Conference defined empowerment as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. It encompasses many other aspects in addition to the economic self-sufficiency. It entails education including self-confidence and ability to take decisions about their own lives.

The Government of Meghalaya had taken many programmes and activities for a much level of overall awareness and gender issues. Meghalaya, along with the rest of the country observed the Women Empowerment Year in 2001. Various awareness programmes were organized throughout the State during the year in collaboration with NGOs and Voluntary Organizations on different issues concerning women. A seminar on the status of women was organized on March 8, 2001. The main issues, which came out in the seminar, were improving economic development of women through Self Help Group, Skill Training, Self Employment, Women's Health and Education, Women Rights and women leadership.

The year 2001 also saw the organization of a regional Seminar for the empowerment of Women by North East Network on 18th September 2001, in collaboration with the Urban Affairs Department, Govt. of Meghalaya at Shillong. The policy prescriptions arrived at the meeting was:

- Codification of Traditional Laws, customary practices to prevent arbitrary gender insensitive action.
- Economic empowerment of women
- Operational Strategies
- Resource management

³See Assam Human Development Report 2003 for GEI Value (page 30).

Based on the findings and recommendations of the seminar, a core team called Women Core Advocacy Group was formed. This core team consists of selected participants from the seminar who will be involved in respective State policy implementation and resource allocation for different programmes.

The Women's Core Advocacy Committee in collaboration with Social Welfare Department prepared the State Plan of Action on National Policy for women empowerment, which was circulated to different government department for comments. The *Meghalaya State Commission for Women* was formed vide the Meghalaya State Commission for Women Act, 2005.

Government Programmes for Empowerment of Women: Women are central to the success of poverty alleviation efforts. It is also realized that women's earnings have a positive correlation with children's health, nutrition level and education. Increase in women income translates more directly into better health and nutrition for children. Improving women's productivity income and quality of life, therefore, implies a multi-dimensional contribution to overall growth and development. This realization brings women at the centre stage of developmental efforts.

As such, the Government at the National and the State level has earmarked various schemes and programmes as strategy for poverty alleviation and thereby increasing the capability of people. The Government of Meghalaya has initiated different schemes and programme for women empowerment and gender equality as the centre of a strategy for poverty alleviation through the different government departments. The different programmes of the government include poverty eradication schemes, micro-credits programmes, and various forms of support for women workers and vocational trainings. These programmes are the government multi-dimensional strategies for economic empowerment of women.

1. The Community and Rural Development Department continues to play an important role in the process of accelerating the economic and social development of rural areas with a view to increasing the income level and quality of life of the rural people. The programmes / schemes being implemented by the Department includes:

The Centrally Sponsored Schemes like

- a) Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY), Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), and Employment assurance scheme.
- b) Central Sector Schemes like National Social Assistance Programme and
- c) State Sector Schemes like Normal CD Schemes Assistance to small and marginal farmers, special Rural Works Programme & Construction of Rural Roads Programme and Old Age Pension Scheme.

Of the above schemes following are the schemes with component on women development:

- (i) The Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) has a component on women development:
 - Availing grant for construction of household under the IAY scheme.
 - Allotment of houses should be in the name of female members of the beneficiaries' households.

Table 8.1: Total Houses and Houses Allotted To Women under Indira Awaas Yojana, 1999-00 to 2008-09

Years	New Construction		Up-gradation	
	Total Houses	Houses for Women	Total Houses	Houses for Women
1999-2000	1987	1510 (76 percent)	415	330 (79 percent)
2000-2001	4377	2590 (59 percent)	2173	1363 (63 percent)
2001-2002	2030	1197 (59 percent)	948	648 (68 percent)
2002-2003	3405	1609 (47 percent)	1735	824 (47 percent)
2003-2004	4331	3003 (69 percent)	2392	1726 (72 percent)
2008-2009	2283	1627 (71 percent)	372	372 (100 percent)

Source: <http://rural.nic.in/rural/Stmonth/.aspx>

(ii) Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) Scheme is the scheme with the facility of a credit cum subsidy and which has an objective to bring every assisted poor above the poverty line.

- This scheme has a component of women where 50 percent of the Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed in each block should be exclusively for the women. Table 8.2 shows that out of the total number of Self Help Groups formed during the three consecutive years 2001 to 2004 women formed only 35 percent in 2001-02, 60 percent in 2002-03 and 50 percent in 2003-04. This reveals that full advantage of the schemes was availed of by women.
- The main activities taken up under SGSY are Piggery, Goatery, Poultry, Dairy farming, Fishery, Rabbit rearing, Weaving, Tailoring & Knitting, Carpentry, Crockery, Cane & Bamboo works, Ginger cultivation, Pineapple cultivation.

Creation of jobs: The schemes for women and weaker sections are covered under various employment schemes such as Prime Minister Rozgar Yojana (PMRY), Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana Scheme (April 1999), Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM), Supply of Improved Toolkits to Rural Artisans (SITRA), Ganga Kalyan Yojana (GKY) and Million Wells Schemes (MWS).

The Guidelines state that at least 30 percent of all these assisted under the scheme should be women.

Support for Women Workers:

- In the form of labour legislation: A landmark judgment by the Supreme Court in the recent ruling that the Maternity Benefit Act 1961 should be extended to daily wages women employees of Municipal Corporation and bodies.
- Social security measures: The Central Government Service Rules made provision for Paternity Leave of fifteen days.
- Other support services: Short stay home for women & girls is a Central Sector Programme launched in 1969 to protect and rehabilitate women and girls facing social or moral danger.

These programmes have been helpful but the coverage and implementation have so far been inadequate. (Source: Community and Rural Development Department).

Table 8.2 Number of Women Self Help Groups Formed During 2002 - 2006

Years	Total no. of SHGs	Women SHGs
2005-2006	4843	2010 (42 percent)
2003-2004	944	476 (50 percent)
2002-2003	360	239 (66 percent)
2001-2002	356	126 (35 percent)

Source: <http://megselfhelp.gov.in/table-1.htm>

2. The Department of Labour through the Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training implemented the Vocational Training for Women Programme that was launched in 1974 under the Director General of Employment and Training to increase women's wage, employment and self-employment opportunities through skill enhancement training programme. In Meghalaya, the women's development programme is being implemented by the Directorate, which falls under the administrative control of Labour Department, Government of Meghalaya.

The statistics in Box 8.4 shows that the schemes were implemented as per the provisions and the number of women trained during the 2003-04 was 107 and the number trained outside the State under the Centrally Sponsored Schemes implemented by the department was 21 which reveals that women beneficiaries were taking full advantage of the schemes.

The recommendation made by the National Council for Vocational Training held on 4th Sept., 2002 at New Delhi that is No Upper age limit be prescribed for women candidates seeking admission in ITS has been implemented from the session 2003-04 in the State.

Box 8.4: Vocational Training of Women, 2003-04

A. Training facilities for women through women exclusive Industrial Training Institute

- (i) There is one woman ITI with training seats of 40
- (ii) Number of women trained during 2003-04 = 40

B. Training Facilities for women in General ITI.

- (i) No. of General ITI (Govt. & Private) in the State = 9
- (ii) Seats in the above ITI = 860
- (iii) Percentage of reservation for women = 25% (approved by State Government)
- (iv) Number of women trained in General ITI during 2003-04 = 67

C. Total number of women trained during the session 03-04 other related information pertaining = 40 + 67=107

D. Number of women trained outside the State under the CSS implemented by the office = 21

Source: Directorate of Employment and Craftsmen Training.

3. The Department of Social Welfare is also implementing many schemes for empowerment of women. These comprise State and Centrally Sponsored Schemes.

(a) *State Schemes:*

(i) **Training for Self Employment of Women – Shillong, Jowai & Tura.**

In order to cater to the needs of the destitute, orphans, widows, deserted wives and women in distress, the Department have set up the three training centres to provide vocational skills and training in knitting, tailoring, embroidery and weaving so as to enable them to be self supported and self employed.

On completion of training, the trainees are given a token grant of Rs.3500/- to Rs.5000/- each to enable them to start their own ventures.

The statistics in box 8.5 reveal that the cumulative total number of beneficiaries was 2600 in three skills of Tailoring, Knitting and Embroidery. These trainees were also given a token grant as mentioned above. Apparently, the scheme was well implemented and obviously provided self-employment to women in need.

Box 8.5: Training for Self-Employment of Women

Centre	Capacity	Trades offered	Stipend	Achievement
Shillong	40	Tailoring, Knitting & Embroidery per month	Rs.500/- per trainee	974 women
Tura	40			932 women
Jowai	25			694 women
Total	105 annually			2600 women

Duration of training: 1 year

Source: <http://megsocialwelfare.gov.in/women/women1.htm>

(ii) **Computer Operator and Programming Assistant**

The Department in collaboration with APTECH Computer Education / Info Solutions Computer Education, Shillong introduced the scheme in 1995 for providing training in computer Operator and Programming to destitute, orphan, deserted women so as to enable them to be economically independent. 30 women from weaker sections were trained and 10 got employment, which showed that the scheme had helped them to be economically empowered.

(b) *Centrally Sponsored Schemes:*

These schemes aim at empowering women socially and economically through the establishment of women Self Help Groups, Integration and Convergence of other related schemes available with the different Departments.

(i) **Swayamsidha** is implemented in 5 (five) C & RD Blocks viz. Project Officers and Umling through Bosco Reach Out.

The target for achievement per block:

SHG	--	100 per Block
Village Society	--	50 per Block
Block Level Society	--	1 per Block

(ii) Working Women's Hostel (WWH): Under the scheme of financial assistance to voluntary organization the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) provides assistance in the form of grant-in-aid for construction of hostel building for working women. The objective of the scheme is to provide safe and economical hostel accommodation to employed women living out of their homes. In Meghalaya, three NGOs viz. Young Women Christian Association, Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Shillong and Garo Baptist Convention Tura were funded by DWCD. The Young Women Christian Association and the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Shillong had accommodated 54 working women and 84 respectively. However, the construction work at Tura is under progress.

(iii) Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP): The programme of STEP launched in 1987 aims to upgrade the skill of poor and marginalized women. The objectives are to provide employment to them on a sustainable basis in the traditional sectors of agriculture, veterinary, fisheries, handlooms and handicrafts.

Meghalaya Apex Handloom Weavers and Handicrafts Co-operative Federation received assistance from Govt. of India under STEP for training women in Handloom and Sericulture.

(iv) Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD): Under the scheme that is assisted by Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD) projects of skill development and training of achieving self-reliance through income generation for women are supported. These projects of training for income generation are in the non-traditional trades and are funded by the Department of Women and Child Development.

The State Level Empowerment Committee for NORAD was constituted and a number of NGOs were recommended to the Government of India for sanction under the scheme. Some of them are: (i) St. Xavier of Christ Jesus, West Garo Hills; (ii) Salesian Sisters of Northern India, Auxilium Convent Nongthymmai; (iii) Seng Kynjoh Shaphrang Ki Kynthei, Kyndong Tuber, Jaintia Hills; (iv) Okkapara Mahila Samity, West Garo Hills; (v) Garobadha Women Society; (vi) FMA Out Reach for Under privileged Women and Children (OUWC), Golfink, Belfonte; and (vii) WISE Social Service Centre, St. Mary's Convent, Laitumkhrah. (Source: Directorate of Social Welfare, Shillong).

4. The Office of the Meghalaya Urban Agency is involved in running several schemes and programme for uplifting people living below poverty line in urban areas. Among the most popular is the Urban Self Employment Programme (USEP) under Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana. The scheme covers the six urban towns of the State where there are Municipal Boards to run the programme. Under this programme, the urban poor are given special incentives, training, help to procure loans from the banks and subsidy. The numbers of women beneficiaries with effect from 2000 to 2004 were 243 in number only in Shillong Municipal Board. (Source: Office of the Meghalaya Urban Affairs).

5. The Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Programme for the Himalayas implemented by the Meghalaya Rural Development Society (MRDS) and funded by the Government of India and IFAD has a major focus on gender mainstreaming.

8.4 Policy Suggestions

Summing up the discussion, it is found that while gender disparity is still very much in evidence, however, there has been important progress on a number of fronts. Women in Meghalaya are constrained with many disabilities in spite of their advantage in the matrilineal society. These constraints are seriously affecting development of women who are important actors of human development. If the state is to achieve human development goals these constraints need to be addressed.

Despite much greater level of overall awareness on gender issues, policies and programmes continue to show limited concerns with gender equity. This was evident in the analysis of some of the schemes and programmes in the State. *The number of women beneficiaries of the schemes and programmes is minimal.* There is lack of gender expertise in the policymaking bodies at the State level to address women's issues and more often than not, the people concerned at the grass root level were not consulted.

The need to institutionalize gender equity in the organization responsible for making policy at the State and National levels has long been recognized. Progress on this has been uneven due to the following barriers:

- A lack of political will
- Underfunding
- Shifting of responsibilities within the government and poor coordination.

In the context of gender related issues and women's empowerment in Meghalaya, the following need to be taken up immediately for achieving better human development:

- Institutionalization of the structures at the National, State and Local levels to build a comprehensive network on gender related issues.
- Better social mobilisation and political will to introduce the concept of women's participation in the development policies, plans and programmes.
- Evolving institutional arrangement to bring about lasting change in the attitude of people in the society representing the interests of all citizens.
- Setting up of a Women Studies Centre in a university in the State will help in generating and compiling scholarly and general data, conducting research on priority basis to increase societal awareness of the problems of women.
- The Women's Commission, which was set up in the State, should be strengthened to take up issues related to women in the State.

There is evidence of growing concern among gender activists to engage more directly with the policy processes and to make people participate in these programmes. It is the challenge for all of us to organize and form an alliance with others and make sure that the issue remains at the forefront of the struggle.