

Role of Women in Politics in Meghalaya

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Abstract: Meghalaya embraces a matrilineal society which is traced to a kinship system where the clan name is determined through maternal lines. Hence women played a very dominant role in society in Meghalaya. This paper examines the political role of women in Meghalaya with a focus on their participation in the general Assembly elections of the state. The study revealed that women played a meagre role in the politics of the state. Meghalaya had a minimal percentage of women elected representatives to the state Assembly. The study also reveals that women were traditionally barred from taking part in decision making in traditional political institutions like the local durbars.

Keywords: Politics, Role, Women, Election

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I. INTRODUCTION

Politics may be defined briefly as a process whereby a group of people, whose opinions or interest are initially divergent, reach collective decisions which are generally regarded as binding on the group, and enforced as common policy.¹ Feminist scholars have been very concerned about what constitutes politics, that it is male activity. An important feature of their efforts have been to proclaim the political nature of private life and the relation between sexes, which has brought traditional Political Science into question, and has forced the authorities to take account of problems hitherto regarded as belonging to private life.² Experiences in various political systems with very different hierarchy and cultural patterns prove the patriarchy mindset of the male over female in all spheres of life and its activities. Women have been excluded from the field of politics since time immemorial. Aristotle assesses the role of women as a wife, mother and householder. Women were excluded from the realm of politics because their deliberative faculties were thought to be inconclusive and lacked authority.³ This kind of perception has received strong reaction from women all around the world which spearheads various women's movements demanding for the right to suffrage and the right to stand for election. The Woman Suffrage Movement actually began in 1848 when the first political action organized by women was the Seneca Falls, New York, Conference, called by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott.⁴ However it was until the late nineteenth century that the seeds of success began to sprout when New Zealand, on 19 September 1893, grant the right to vote to all adult women. In 1902 Australia became the first country where women obtained both the right to vote and the right to stand for election to the Commonwealth Parliament.⁵ Finland granted women the right to vote in 1906, Denmark in 1915, U.S.A in 1920, Great Britain in 1928, India in 1950 etc. The granting of this basic right has opened more channels and greater opportunities for women's participation in politics. But women's share of decision-making power is still minimal. Regional averages of the percentage of women in parliament are as follows.

Table 1: Regional averages of the percentage of women in parliamentary seats around the world, as of June 2008

| Countries | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Nordic countries | 41.1% |
| Americas | 21.8% |
| Europe(excluding Nordic countries) | 19.1% |
| Asia | 17.4% |
| Sub Saharan Africa | 17.2% |
| Pacific | 13.4% |
| Arab states | 9.6% |

Source: International Women's Democracy Center, Fact sheet on women's political participation

According to Table 1, it is revealed that as of the year 2008, not more than 50% of women were represented in legislatures around the world. In the Nordic countries women occupy 41.1% and the Arab states recorded the least regional average of women's representation with only 9.6% of the parliamentary seats.

Looking at our own country India, women still face many obstacles in their fight for representation. No women's organizations specifically focus on getting women elected at the national level.⁶ Statistics reveal that India lags behind many countries when it comes to women's participation in politics. With only 11.80% women representation in the Lok Sabha and 11.10% in the Rajya Sabha, India ranks 148 in the world as of 1st March, 2018, according to the data released by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) an international group that works for promoting democracy, peace and co-operation in the world.⁷

II. OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study is to understand the socio-political status of women in Meghalaya. The study will try to particularly ascertain the participatory role of women in the politics of the state.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is focused on the participation of women in the decision making bodies in the state of Meghalaya. The study basically relies on secondary sources available from books, articles, Meghalaya election handbook and internet sources.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

Meghalaya, one of the states in the Indian union, is the homeland of three hill communities, the khasis, the garos and the jaintias. All these communities have matrilineal societies where the clan name is taken from the mother. Women in Meghalaya enjoyed a lot of freedom where she is not dictated by anybody. Nobody would ask her who her father is or who her husband is, before they get to know the person, unlike in a patriarchal set-up, where she has to demonstrate her identity as the daughter or the wife of so and so to the world.⁸ The matrilineal system provides for an elevated position of the women in the Khasi society. The members of a clan trace their descent through a female. The women in Khasi and Garo society inherit property and the youngest daughter among the Khasis and any daughter among the Garo remain the custodian of the family property.⁹

When we turned to the field of politics we find that women's presence in the legislative bodies is scarce. 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 not only from the reserved seats but also from the general seats. In 1937, two women contested the reserved seat, Mrs Berlina Diengdoh and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. The latter was elected and it was for the first time that a woman became a member of the Legislative Assembly. Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh 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 the North East. In 1946, five women contested in the elections, they were Mrs Bonniely Khongmen, T. W. Shadap, Berlina Diengdoh, Padma Kumari Gohain and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. Except Mrs B. Khongmen who was a Congress nominee, all four ladies contested as independents. Padma K. Gohain contested the general seat, the others, the Shillong women seat, Mrs B. Khongmen was elected.¹⁰

The state of Meghalaya attained full-fledged statehood on January 21, 1972. But looking back at the past history of its legislative Assembly and general election to the union legislature, representation of women lags far behind. Electoral politics is still considered as the domain of men. It appears that women themselves are not interested in contesting elections maybe of the fact that they are so embedded into the traditional belief that politics is the arena of men only. So far from 1972 to 2018, only 18 women candidates have won in the State Assembly election of 60 seats. A brief survey of the number of women elected representatives to the State Assembly from 1972- 2018 is listed below.

Table 2: Number of women's representation in the State Legislative Assembly

| Year | Total no. of women candidates | No. of women candidates elected |
|------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1972 | 09 | 01 |
| 1978 | 07 | 01 |
| 1983 | 08 | Nil |
| 1988 | 03 | 02 |
| 1993 | 07 | 01 |
| 1998 | 15 | 03 |
| 2003 | 14 | 02 |
| 2008 | 21 | 01 |

| | | |
|------|----|----|
| 2013 | 25 | 04 |
| 2018 | 32 | 03 |

Source: Meghalaya Election Handbook, website of the Chief Electoral Officer Meghalaya.

According to Table 2, it is revealed that from the year 1972 till 2018, not more than four women candidates were elected to the State Assembly. In 1983, it is discouraging to see that none of the women candidates were able to win any seat. In the latest 2018 Assembly elections we find that women's access to political participation and to higher positions in the political structure has been growing but when we look at the number of women being elected to the Legislative Assembly, it is pretty disheartened to see that at present only three women candidates are represented in the Assembly of Sixty seats. It is clear that women in Meghalaya have not been accepted as policy formulators and decision makers.

Besides the women in politics, there are other prominent women like Bertha Gyndykes Dkhar, a visually impaired educationist who invented the Braille code in Khasi, Wansuk Myrthong who became the first woman from Meghalaya to scale Mt. Everest, Patricia Mukhim, a social activist, a writer and journalist earned her the Padma shri Award in 2000, Claudia Lyngwa an IPS officer who displayed immense courage and outstanding gallantry, Dr Helen Giri who has contributed in the field of khasi music and tradition was awarded the padma shri in 2008, Linza Fenny Syiem who became the first karateka from Meghalaya to win a gold medal in the National Games in 2011 and Jenita Mary Nongkynrih, the first woman Scientist from Meghalaya to bag the title- ISRO Young Scientist Award. There are also other women activists who heads various NGOs like Hasina Kharbhih, Agnes Kharshiing, Angela Rangad etc whose voice and whose efforts are really putting a challenge to the Government in the State. However, now with the spread of education and influence of modernization, women are more conscious of their political right.¹¹

Women in Meghalaya do participate actively in both national and regional political parties. During election, they participate in political campaigns, like processions, public meetings, giving public speeches, exercising their franchise and in some polling booths women voters exceed that of men.¹² The only place that women were traditionally barred from taking part in decision making is the traditional political institutions like the local durbars. The traditional political institutions are the lowest level of administration in Meghalaya where the entire decision making is being undertaken by men. This is a clear visibility of discrimination that tradition puts on women. Though women in Meghalaya enjoy more power and freedom than their counterpart in other parts of the country, though they have social and economic freedom, yet discrimination exists in the political arena.¹³

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up we can say that unfortunately, in Meghalaya, women are underrepresented and their role in politics is meagre and minimal. No doubt, women are at par with men in intellect, they are hardworking, sincere and if these qualities are utilized at the decision making level and 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 been different. Having women in leadership roles is important in having the authority to decide and negotiate on issues that affect them.

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