



**Women's participation in the electoral process - A case study of
the recent assembly election in Laitumkhrah Constituency**

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- Amina Marbaniang



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Chapter 1

Introduction

Women's participation and representation in politics is the first step towards Women's empowerment and emancipation. Increasing women's political participation is an effective means for promoting more open and democratic societies in which women are full participants and beneficiaries of national development. The Beijing Declaration and platform for action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, convened by the UN in 1995 emphasize the need for member states to "take measures, including, where appropriate, in electoral systems that encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions on the same proportion and at the same levels as men." Furthermore, in paragraph 190, it encourages states to review the differential impact of electoral systems on the political representation of women in elected bodies and consider, where appropriate, the adjustments or reform of those systems". In India, the history of women's entry into politics can be traced to as far back as during India's struggle for freedom. Even though Indian women had entered the Legislature since 1926, yet a comparative analysis of women's political participation in India today reveals that they are still under-represented and marginalized in politics. Incidentally, India the largest democracy lags much behind other countries including its neighbours Pakistan and Afghanistan, when it comes to the participation of women in politics. With only 10.9 percent of women representation in the Lok Sabha and 9 percent in the Rajya Sabha currently, India ranks 99th among 187 countries according to the comparative data by the Inter-Parliamentary Union¹.

¹*The Inter-Parliamentary Union is an International Organisation that works for promoting democracy, peace and co-operation among people in the world.*

When it comes to Meghalaya, where the people follow the matrilineal system, women are thought to be in a better position than men. However, this is just a myth. Women in Meghalaya are being under-represented in the Legislative Assembly, the District Council and the local durbar. In the matrilineal system, the children adopt the title of the mother's clan, and lineage is traced back through the mother. However, in spite of having a matrilineal system, tradition has debarred the women from participation in the political and administrative affairs, which are considered predominantly the domain of men. Traditionally in the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo hills women are not allowed to attend the 'Dorbar' or the village council. In fact, the practice of not having women in durbars is still prevalent even today. It is only in a few localities of Shillong that some amount of participation of women at the dorbar is allowed. In fact, it is still unthought-of for a woman to vie for the post of headman in the Khasi society. This discrimination of women from early history has been reinforced in the Khasi psyche so permanently that doing away with it would require a radical movement. Although it is unthinkable for women to succeed in the office of the chief (such as in becoming the Syiem of a Hima or kingdom), in rare circumstances, in the absence of legitimate male rulers, women were accepted as rulers.

In the Khasi and Jaintia hills in particular, until recently, women have not asserted their political and social rights, even though a number of them were nominated to the khasi states constitution-making durbar in 1949 and to the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills autonomous District Council in 1952. However, at that time, many of them were employed as schoolteachers, doctors, and employees in government offices. We may recall that in the pre-independence period, women were largely excluded from taking any leading role in social, political, or cultural organizations. This is reflected in the meeting of the males of the khasi states and the Khasi-Jaintia Young Men Association in the twenties. Incidentally, even the Seng Khasi, which was formed on November 23, 1899, was led by 16 young men. It was only in the sixties that the women of the khasi hills came together under the banner of Ka Synjuk Kynthei, which was till then the only Khasi women's social and

cultural organization. This women's organization brought out a quarterly magazine *Ka Rympei* (The Hearth). However, they have not taken up any real women's issues. In four of the volumes that are available, the magazine centered around health care, kitchen's tidbits, education, social welfare activities and others. It is interesting to note that in one of the articles written by Jormanik Syiem, former Syiem of Hima Myllem entitled *Ka Kyrdan ki Kynthei Khasi* (status of Khasi women) the central focus was on women as the homemaker and their excellent performance in the academic and professional lines besides their services to the cause of health and education. This therefore, shows that traditionally, women in these hills enjoyed autonomy only in home making and domestic management. They occupy apart from that, a marginalized position both at the social and political levels.

In the pre-independence period, the Government of India Act 1935 gave women the right to vote. The Act also provided for representation of women by reservation of a seat from the Shillong constituency in the then Assam Legislative Assembly. This was known as Shillong women seat. The Act also permitted women to contest for general seats. Hence, in 1937, two women contested from the Reserved constituency and Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was declared elected and was inducted as a minister twice into the Md Saidulla ministry (1939 to 1941 and 1942-1945). She was the first women from the north-east to become a minister. In 1946, Assembly election four women contested from the reserved constituency and Bonnily Khongmen was declared elected. She was elected the Deputy speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1952.

After India got her Independence, the first parliamentary election to the Lok Sabha was held in 1952. In this election, three candidates from the autonomous district constituency of the then undivided Assam contested for Lok Sabha seat. Bonnily Khongmen the only woman candidate was elected and she became the first and the only women from Assam to be a member of the Lok Sabha in 1952. It is interesting to note that

after 1952, the only other khasi women to contest in the Lok Sabha election was Elizabeth Laitphlang in 1998 but was unsuccessful.

When we look at the history of women's participation in the Assembly elections in Meghalaya from 1972 onwards, we find that the number of women who contested was very insignificant. The percentage of women candidates was never more than six percent. The number of women who were elected was also very insignificant. In the first election to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly in 1972, nine women came forward to contest in the election, however only one was elected from Garo hills. In 1978, only one out of seven women candidates was elected. In 1983 no woman candidate was returned though eight of them contested. In 1988 out of three women candidates two were elected, one from the Khasi hills and the other from the Garo hills. In 1993, seven contested but only one was successful from the Khasi hills. In 1998 election, out of 15 candidates, three were elected, two from Khasi hills and one from Garo hills. In 2003 election, 14 women contested but only two were elected, one each from Khasi hills and Garo hills. With the untimely demise of Mr Thrang Hok Rngad, the sitting MLA from Laban constituency, a bye election was held in 2004. In this election, his widow contested and won the seat. Thus, the number of women legislators rose to four in the house of sixty. In the history of Meghalaya politics, we find that the most number of women who contested was in the last election held in 2008. In this election, 19 women contested but only one, Ms Ampareen Lyngdoh, was elected from Laitumkhrah constituency on UDP ticket. However due to her resignation shortly after the elections, a bye-election was held again in 2009. It is interesting to note that in this bye-election the same woman candidate contested from another party and still won the elections.

Even though the state of Meghalaya has reached its 38th year of existence yet, the number of women participating in active politics is still very less. At present only one seat out of sixty in the state legislative Assembly is occupied by a woman. Again, we see



that only very strong women would choose to challenge men in our matrilineal society. This is not only an irony but also a sad fact.

The objective of this present project is to trace the contours of women's participation in Meghalaya as a whole, and in the constituency of Laitumkhrach in particular. The project aims to accomplish this by eliciting the response of the general public towards their participation in politics; analyzing the success rate of women participants in politics, with special reference to Laitumkhrach Constituency and; arriving at an estimate of the future prospects of women's participation in politics based on the findings of the present project.

Number of Female candidates put up by political parties in the Assembly Elections of Meghalaya

Year	INC	APHLC	HSPDP	NCP	PDIC	HPU	UDP	PDM	MDP	BJP	SP	LJP	IND	Total
1972		2											7	9
1978	3	1											3	7
1983	3	2			1								2	8
1988	1	1											1	3
1993	2					1				2			2	7
1998	3		2				3	1		1	1		4	15
2003	4		2	2			1		1	2			2	14
2008	3			2			3		3	1		4	3	19
Total no of women put up by parties so far	19	6	4	4	1	1	7	1	4	6	1	4	24	82

Source: General Election Results and Statistics- Election Commission of India

Chapter 2

Methodology Adopted

The present project conducted as case study of the Laitumkhrach Constituency to gather data and to gauge the general public's response to women's participation in the MLA Elections pertaining to the Constituency. The Laitumkhrach Constituency is situated right at the heart of the city and is the educational hub of Shillong, as well of the state of Meghalaya. It is inhabited by a cross-section of people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. This Constituency has witnessed much social and political changes and development in recent years. In the sphere of politics, this constituency has witnessed a number of women participants in the MLA elections since 1978. The first woman participant to have contested for election then was Usha Bhattacharjee. She constested the election from the Indian National Congress but failed to make an impact in the election. The most recent elections saw the entrance of yet another woman candidate in the person of Ampareen Lyngdoh who contested twice, in 2008 and 2009 in the MLA election and the subsequent bye election² from the UDP and the Congress party respectively. It is noteworthy to mention here that she was successfully elected in both the elections.

In order to gauge the present political scenario about the Laitumkhrach Constituency, a survey was conducted with a set of specifically designed questionnaires. These questionnaires were designed in such a manner that data were collected on relevant issues such as:

- (i) People's participation in local politics,

- (ii) their views and opinions of the present political scenario,
- (iii) their reactions and responses to the participation of women as candidates in elections and
- (iv) the possibility for the induction of more women candidates into the Legislative Assembly in the near future.

To avoid any kind of lopsidedness in the gathering and analyzing of the data collected, people from different educational and occupational strata were selected and interviewed through the questionnaires. These people included students, homemakers, businesspersons, present and retired government employees, academicians, politicians, and members of non-governmental organizations and of the local village dorbar. The collection of these primary data was also supported by a substantial research of secondary data present in the form of news articles, essays on the Election process and women participation in politics and other available material.

The data collected were individually studied and observations were made of the respondents' comments and inputs given to the questions asked through the questionnaires. These questionnaires were further analysed collectively to form a working picture of the present scenario of the Laitumkhrah Constituency. Here, the most consistent and reliable responses were taken into account and interpreted accordingly. It is interesting to note that there appears to be a consensus in the response of the public about the need to encourage or discourage the participation of women in the elections and the potential of women to contribute to the growth and development of the state in general and the constituency as a whole.

Chapter 3

Interpreting the Data

It is imperative that a background of the political history be present at the outset of this chapter so that the present analysis and interpretation of the data collected is made within the context of the political changes and developments that have occurred in the Laitumkhrah Constituency. In doing so, it is hoped that the impact of the project's finding is brought out clearly. The first ever state assembly elections were held in 1972 soon after Meghalaya became a full fledged state. There were no women candidates contesting at the elections then from Laitumkhrah Constituency. However, this was to change soon in the next legislative assembly elections in 1978, where Usha Bhattacharjee (INC) made her entry into politics by contesting in this election. Unfortunately, she failed to garner the support of the public of the constituency. In 1983, yet another woman candidate, Ms. Tiplut Nongbri (INC), made her foray into politics by contesting in the elections. She also met the same fate as the first contestant, losing the election to her male counterpart. After this, there was a gap of one term where the next election saw no woman candidates in the local elections from Laitumkhrah Constituency. Ms Ivoryna Shylla, was to be the next woman candidate to file her nominations for the 1993 elections, contesting from the BJP. Continuing the losing streak of women participants in this constituency, Ms Shylla was not immune from it as she followed the fate of her predecessors.

In what could be termed as a significant change in the election scene in the Laitumkhrah Constituency, two women candidates contested the elections in the year 1998. Ms Margaret Rose Mawlong and Ms Naramai Langstieh contested the elections

from the UDP and the HSPDP respectively. The results of this election were no different from the preceding ones where women candidates were not considered fit enough by the electorate to represent them at the assembly. There was a lull for a term in the participation of women in the 2003 elections from this constituency. Things were to change for the better in the next local elections in 2008 with the entry of Ms. Ampareen Lyngdoh, who also happened to be the only woman candidate contesting the elections. In what could prove to be a landmark reversal of the preceding years failures, this candidate successfully trumped her male rivals not only in the local elections in 2008 but also in 2009 in the bye-elections held soon after she resigned from the very position she was elected to by the electorate. The following table is a statistical representation of the party-wise break up of women candidates put up the political parties in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly elections for Laitumkhrah Constituency since 1978.

Year	INC	APHLC	HSPDP	NCP	PDIC	HPU	UDP	PDM	MDP	BJP	SP	LJP	IND	Total
1972														0
1978	1													1
1983	1													1
1988														0
1993										1				1
1998			1				1							2
2003														0
2008							1							1
2009 Bye- election	1													1
Total no of women put up by parties so far	3		1				2			1				7

The analysis of the data collected from primary sources has provided valuable insights into the present political scenario of the Laitumkhrah Constituency following the recent developments in the state and in the constituency itself. Responses received through the questionnaires reveals that a majority of the respondents kept track of the government's performance through the newspapers on a daily basis. The knowledge of this fact ensures that the data collected for the purpose of analysis is acquired from people who are not only aware of the developments in state and local politics, but who are actively interested in keeping abreast of what is happening around them, primarily because they were concerned about the welfare of the state as a whole. These informed respondents felt that the changes taking place in local politics were not significant enough to excite any kind of social or political interests. There appears to be a growing consensus in the electorate, as far as the target Constituency is concerned, that women participation in politics in the 21st century should be encouraged as their presence in state and local politics could bring in new and fresh inputs into the policymaking and policy implementation process. Most of the respondents felt that the participation of women in politics would bring positive changes in the state's administration.

It is safe to conjecture here that perhaps at the initial stages of women participation in politics, they were considered either unfit or not worthy enough to represent the constituency at any level of politics. There is however, a change observed coming in this regard as responses received reveal that more and more of the public in the target constituency are beginning to see women as qualified enough to be elected as representatives to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Surprisingly, the most prominent reason for this change in opinion and views lies in the fact that many people are seeing women as more honest, sincere, transparent, highly qualified, approachable, accountable and less corrupted than their male counterparts. Having said that, however, it does not imply that all women are perfect compared to men. A section of those who responded positively towards women participating in politics also revealed their fear that their presence would impede the smooth function of the state. The reasons' underlying this fear is the fact the respondents also felt that women may be ruled by their emotions and their

fickle-mindedness. Others see the danger of gender biasness coming into play. Still a few of the respondents see women just as capable of being corrupt as their male counterparts.

In spite of the possible changes that women could bring to local politics, many feel that the effectiveness of those (women representatives) who has been elected to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly has been insignificant and negligible. The cause for their ineffectiveness could be attributed to the fact that they have always been a minority group in the assembly and for this reason have been sidelined or overlooked. This most certainly does not augur well for women participation in state and local politics. On a lighter vein many admitted that they would rejoice if Meghalaya were to have a woman Chief Minister for a change. They remarked that perhaps a woman Chief Minister could bring in the much needed change, stability and development in the state that has not come to fruition under the leadership of male Chief Ministers.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

When we compare the political participation of women at all levels, in Meghalaya with those in the rest of the country, we find that women in Meghalaya lag much behind. This is due to the fact that in other parts of the country women have a 50 percent reservation in the Panchayats and Municipal bodies, while there is no such reservation for women in Meghalaya, either in the District Councils or in the Local bodies. But with the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha on the 9th of March, 2010, it provides some kind of hope for the women in the State that they would get significant representation in the Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly. The passing of the Bill has been hailed as historic and a great step in the empowerment of women. The aim of the Bill is to reserve 33.3 percent of seats in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for women. It was drafted first by the H. D. Deve Gowda United Front Government and was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 12th September, 1996. Though it has been introduced in Parliament several times since then, the Bill could not be passed due to lack of political consensus. Some political parties have always opposed this Bill on various grounds. However, it is perceived that the underlying fear of such parties is that their male leaders would not get a chance to fight in the elections if 33 percent of seats were reserved for women. The Bill has also been opposed by politicians from the socially and economically backward classes. Their foremost argument is that reservation would only help women of the elitist groups and rich classes to gain seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. They fear that if this happens, it will lead to more discrimination and under-representation of the poor and backward classes.

With the passing of the Bill, a number of questions have been raised on the ability and capability of women as policy and decision makers. A member of the NGO, Act Now For Harmony and Democracy (ANHAD) which launched Campaign Reservation Express, in support of the Women Reservation Bill observed that the same questions regarding the ability of women as representatives and policy makers should also be put forward to men. According to them, there should be no discrimination between men and women. They have pointed out that reservation for women in Panchayats and local bodies has facilitated the entry of millions of women into the political arena. These women have faced tremendous odds to enter into the electoral fray; many of them are role models for their community and all women per se. Their presence has brought many important women's issues on the agenda of panchayats and local bodies. This positive experience therefore needs to be strengthened and replicated at all levels. In Meghalaya too, the same apprehensions have been raised by many people regarding the bill. It is interesting to note that majority of the people interviewed, reacts positively towards women's participation in politics not only in Laitumkrah Constituency but in Meghalaya as a whole. They felt that with more women participants, they would be able to influence and bring a new perspective in policy and decision making which will bring about the much needed change and development.

Women in Meghalaya are largely politically passive though they are socially active. Even though many women are involved in the women's wings of the various political parties, yet they have not emerged as leaders at the party level. However, if Reservation Bill manages to get through the Lok sabha, there is hope that more women will be encouraged to participate in active politics. Unless women are part of the decision making process, real issues will not be addressed and hence it will hamper the progress and development of the state and nation as a whole.

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All Statistics are based on Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya from 1972 to 2008 compiled by the Election Commission of India

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE COLLECTION OF DATA

PROJECT: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS – A CASE STUDY OF THE RECENT ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN LAITUMKHRAH 2009

Under: Shillong College, Laitumkhrah

1. At what level will you place your participation/interest in local politics?

- Answer:**
1. No participation or interest at all.
 2. Only when an election is drawing near.
 3. Like to read the newspapers a daily basis to keep track of the government's performance.
 4. Actively engages in discussions and talks on political issues at any available opportunity.
 5. is a member or is involved with a political party at some level.

2. To what will you attribute your interest (choose answers from group 1) or not having any interests at all (choose from group 2) in local politics?

- Answer:**
- Group 1:
- A. Concerned about the welfare of the state.
 - B. Academic interests
 - C. A hobby
 - D. Feels that it is one's duty as citizen of the nation.
- Group 2:
- A. Have become disillusioned by the poor performance of past governments.
 - B. Politics has lost its significance in today's world.
 - C. There are other more important subjects than politics.
 - D. Not naturally inclined towards politics.

3. Have you noticed any change in the trends as far as local politics is concerned?

- Answer: A. Yes.
B. No.
C. Not aware of any changes.
D. Changes not significant enough to excite interest.
E. Does not care if there are or are not changes.

4. One of the changes in recent local politics is the entrance of women representatives into the fray and who have also been elected into power. Are you aware of any such development and with reference to which constituency? Tick two relevant answers (choosing one from Group A and one from Group B):

- Answer: Group A: 1. Yes, I am aware of such developments.
2. Heard about it but have not bothered to confirm it.
Constituency _____
- Group B. 1. Not aware of any such development.
2. Not interested in keeping tracks on political developments.

5. According to you participation of women in local politics in the 21st Century...

- Answers: 1. Should be encouraged.
2. Should not be encouraged.
3. Cannot say .
4. Choose not to answer.

6. What is the reason for your answer (given above)?

Answer: If you have ticked 1,

- a. The entrance of women in politics will bring a change in perspectives.
- b. Women will receive an active representative.
- c. There will be an improvement in the condition of women.
- d. New and fresh inputs will be introduced into the policy making and policy implementation process.

If you have ticked 2,

- a. Cultural tradition does not allow such things to happen.
- b. Women are not wired to hold such responsible posts men are.
- c. Their presence can be a cause for more confusion and division.
- d. It is not right for women to be involved in activities.

7. According to you, the participation of women in politics will _____ in the state's administration:

- Answer:**
- a. bring positive changes
 - b. bring negative changes
 - c. have no affect at all
 - d. cannot say

8. Do you think women are qualified enough to be elected as representatives to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly?

- Answer :**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Cannot say

9. Can you offer one good quality of a woman that can contribute positively to politics in Meghalaya?

Answer: _____

10. Can you offer one bad quality of a woman that can affect politics in Meghalaya negatively?

Answer: _____

11. What do you think is the reason or the factor leading to the entrance of women in politics as representatives or candidates in the elections? (tick as many as is relevant)

- Answer:
- a. dissatisfaction in the way the constituency has been represented
 - b. dissatisfaction in the way women in the constituency has been represented
 - c. desire to contribute to society
 - d. choice of the public
 - e. all of the above
 - f. none of the above

12. Do you feel that the women representatives present in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly have been effective in any way?

- Answer:
- a. Yes, very much
 - b. Yes, but negligible
 - b. Not at all
 - c. Maybe
 - d. Cannot say
 - e. have not noticed any such changes.

13. How would you feel if Meghalaya was to have a woman Chief Minister?

Answer: _____

14. Do you feel Meghalaya will do well with more women representatives in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly?

- Answer:
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Cannot say

15. According to you, women voters would prefer to cast their votes based on –

- Answer:
- a. gender of the candidates
 - b. manifestoes of the candidates
 - c. charisma of the candidates
 - d. pressure from external forces
 - e. other _____
-

Respondent's name: _____

Occupation: _____

Residence: _____

Interviewed on: _____

Attitude of the respondent towards the project: Positive/Negative/Satisfactory