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# Women's Wide Canvas

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Evakorlang Kharkongor  
Indasien S. Warjri

**The Book :**

Woman's Wide Canvas is a collection of various women - related articles, with a spectrum of subjects from poetry to sociology, to the dynamics of politics and economics, science, law, education and others. As the title suggests, it tries to reveal the different colours of the role and status of women in the Northeast with special reference to the state of Meghalaya.









# Women's Wide Canvas: Issues and Challenges

**Editors**

*Evakorlang Kharkongor*

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**EBH Publishers (India)**  
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**Evakorlang Kharkongor, Indasien S. Warjri**  
Women's Wide Canvas: Issues and Challenges

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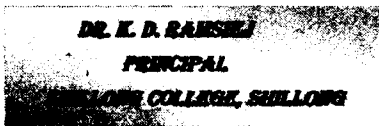
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## FOREWORD

I am pleased to learn that the Women's Cell, Shillong College, established on April 2009, has come up with a very challenging task in bringing forward an ISBN publication entitled **WOMEN'S WIDE RANVAS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**.

The various articles contained in this book have thrown light on various issues with regard to society in general and women in particular. The book has been authored by eminent personalities, members of the academia, intellectuals from various fields, former principal, vice principals and many others, thereby highlighting the involvement of women in the challenging world of today.

The initiative taken by the Cell to publish this book is another attempt at encouraging Research and Publication by members of the Cell as well as the teaching fraternity of the College.

On behalf of the College I congratulate members of the Women's Cell particularly Dr.(Mrs) E.Kharkongor, and Indasien Warjri for their untiring efforts at bringing out the publication and I am confident that the book will cater to the needs of the readers of the State and the country as a whole.

Dated Shillong

  
Dr. K.D.Ramsiej





## Preface

Established in 1956, Shillong College has now emerged as one of the premier institutions of the North Eastern Region. Assessed and Accredited by NAAC in 2003 and reaccruited in 2010, the college tirelessly strives to achieve the dynamics of academic excellence that would ensure capacity building amongst learners, in keeping with the changing needs of the present day. Concerned that women have to be equipped with the capacity not only to act but also to make an impact, the college established the Women's Cell on 03 April, 2009, under the dynamic leadership of the former principal Dr (Mrs.) M.P.R. Lyngdoh. The main objectives of the Cell are to adopt programmes and activities for women that will enhance self-esteem and self-confidence, develop their critical thinking ability to make informed choices in areas like education, employment and health, especially reproductive health and to foster decision-making abilities and actions. A number of programmes have been organized by the Cell to ensure that the needs, rights and contributions of women are reflected in the correct perspective.

This book, *Women's Wide Canvas: Issues and Challenges* is an attempt to present a multi-dimensional picture of the struggles and achievements of women. The papers included in this volume have the distinctive qualities that reflect the multiple issues and challenges facing women, both domestically and professionally. The manifold forms of discrimination and exploitation encountered by women have been vividly highlighted in areas of literature, education, economic and political participation, legal matters and others. The position of women in the matrilineal society has also been dealt with, revealing vital areas of gender discrimination and contradictions.

We express our sincere gratitude to all the paper contributors without whose valuable contributions, this book would not have materialized. We are indebted to our principal Dr K.D.Ramsiej - his unstinted support, motivation, guidance and encouragement ensured the success of this endeavour. We place on record our deep sense of appreciation for the confidence and cooperation, as well as the feedbacks and comments received from members of the Women's Cell of the college, Dr S.Pandey, V.R.Solomon, Dr H.Diengdoh,

O Kharkongor and P. Das. We also extend our sincere appreciation to Dr M.Dey and Shri K.D.Roy, Vice Principals of the college and to all our well wishers and friends for the support and encouragement. Finally, we are grateful to Smt. A. Rynjah for helping with the preparation and typing of the book.

*Evakorlang Kharkongor*

*Indasien S.Warjiri*



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22. **Vinery R. Solomon**, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Shillong College.
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24. **Ibakitbok S. Kharkongor**, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Shillong College.

## Introduction

***“The Story of Creation: When God created the Woman — Man saw Perfection. She was uniquely different and Man knew that they shared the same destiny because they had a common creator and a common goal.”***

Yet, the socio-cultural ethos of a male dominated society defines the position of a woman, limiting the boundaries and space for her unfolding. The conventional roles of a woman in a male dominated society relegated her to the background, her dreams and aspirations forgotten in her struggles to meet expectations of the home and the family. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the intellectuals of the Western world began to reconsider the status of women. The great discovery of radium by Madame Curie and her husband, for which they were awarded the Nobel Prize, motivated the confidence of women in the western countries, spearheading a worldwide Women’s Liberation Movement. The status of women in society came to be recognized and accepted in the modern world.

In India, the first mass mobilization of women for socio-political change took place in the early twentieth century when women participated, along with men, in the independence struggle. However, the roles of these women were no longer visible once India became independent. This invisibility which characterizes women’s participation in social change and nation building needs to be addressed. This is because, despite being accorded an unequal status in a patriarchal society, there are innumerable accounts of women overcoming all odds to bring about changes in their own lives and in the lives of those around them.

For sixteen long years in the history of Independent India, the country was led by a woman Prime Minister, and in recent times a woman President. This assured that women could and did reach the highest rungs of political office. The passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 1993, to reserve one-thirds of the seats for women at the local government levels, has been described as unprecedented even among the developed countries of the world. As India stepped into the new millennium, the deeply entrenched patriarchal bias against women is still far from ebbing. The Women’s Reservation Bill introduced as the 81<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1996

and passed by the Rajya Sabha on 09 March, 2010 is still pending to be passed in the Lok Sabha, a blatant fact reflecting the gender bias that still continues to exist in recent times.

The state of Meghalaya has the distinction of following a matrilineal system and as such, women are held in high esteem. However, a closer look at facts and circumstances reveal that women, even in such societies, are impoverished in every sphere of activity, not by choice but by a systematic exclusion from policy options and protective measures. Crimes against women are reported with depressing regularity not just in Meghalaya, but also in the entire country. Dowry, female infanticide, domestic violence, sexual abuses and a host of others continue to be the pervasive problems in India.

This edited volume contains twenty-one papers dealing with a variety of issues. One is provided with a deep insight into the issues and challenges encountered by women, as they struggle with their manifold roles and responsibilities, to become visible in the complexities of the modern world.

*Women – Biologically Strong and Balanced*, contributed by Malay Dey is an illuminating analysis on the changing perceptions that women are no longer “the weaker sex”. The extraordinary breakthroughs by elite-level women athletes have shattered the remnants of the frailty myth, bringing home the truth about women’s strength. This is also reflected in the context of the Indian women who have been able to transcend traditional roles and get themselves ready to make the best use of the opportunities offered to them. The author emphasized that women have to manifest certain degrees of maleness in order to survive in the ‘male dominated’ world. Women need to portray a strong front in order to protect themselves from emotional and physical hurt; while at the same time, being resolute in achieving what they want from life.

V.C.S. Dkhar’s article entitled, *Indian Women—A Historical Perspective*, describes the conditions of women in the Indian context. This article reveals how women in India still suffer from social injustices when they are coerced to bow to social taboos and a number of demeaning religious rites and practices. However, considerable improvements have been made to uplift Indian women through the efforts of the British and Indian reformers as well as the Government of India.

The article entitled *Women’s Education in India*, contributed by S.M. Sungoh, depicts the need and the importance of women’s education in India, qualities of educated women and problems related to women’s education. The writer contends that although India is poised to becoming a superpower and a developed country by 2020, the growth of women’s education, especially in the rural areas has been very slow. This obviously means that a large

number of womenfolk in the country are illiterate, weak, backward and exploited. Therefore, it is emphasized that education is the most powerful tool to change the position of women in our society.

Deigracia Nongkynrih & Eugene D. Thomas's article on *Education and the Labour Participation of Women: A Review of Literature*, attempts to highlight the role of education in shaping the work choices of women. This paper gives an insight into the different studies that were undertaken to explain the possible influence of education on the work participation of women.

The article entitled *Women Empowerment – Indian Perspective*, contributed by Brinda Bazely Kharbiryumbai reflects on how the progress of a country can be gauged by the advancement in the status of its womenfolk. The pathways for women's empowerment can be achieved through one crucial factor, and that is good quality education. An early recognition and removal of barriers in bringing out the full potential of women at the national level will definitely help in transforming India into a developed nation.

Kareen Sohtun's article *Women Empowerment/Gender Discrimination*, discusses some critical issues that women confront in the present day, particularly, issues relating to the discriminatory practices in the context of a largely patriarchal society. Such issues include sexual abuse, eve-teasing, gender role stereotyping, female infanticide and female foeticide, woman's health, child marriage, dowry, harassment at work places and educational discrimination. The paper examines the new challenges of empowering women with access to knowledge, resources and a greater autonomy in decision making.

*Women's Education and Gender Sensitization*, an article contributed by Donna R. Diengdoh, lays emphasis on how women's education is a crucial factor for the growth and development of any society. In the modern complex social organization, education for women is important and attention must be paid especially to the education of the girl-child. The government has taken steps towards the improvement of women's education in the country; however, much depends on the citizens for implementing the same. In fact, India has many schools and colleges which are dedicated to provide exclusive education to women.

Advocate Meena Kharkongor's article entitled *Laws Related to Women and Children*, presents an illuminating exposition on the various measures of positive discrimination that can be adopted by the State in favour of women so as to neutralize the cumulative socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages faced by them. This article dwells on the specific Constitutional Provision for women and child as expressed in Article 15 (3). Various offences relating to women and punishment thereof as provided under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 have been thoroughly discussed.

Shruti Pandey, in her article *Development of alternatives: Marginalized Voices Open Up New Historical Archives*, examines the circumstances in which women's writing in Hindi has evolved. The article reveals how post-colonial women novelists in Hindi now have a presence and a visibility beyond their immediate location, constituting a significant space in contemporary writing in Hindi. Through alternative images, women have taken up the challenge of transgressing the image of the eternally feminine, sacrificing, submissive woman.

The paper entitled *Edward Said and Postcolonial Feminism*, contributed by Dhira Bhowmick is an attempt to establish links between Edward Said's "Travelling Theory" and Postcolonial feminism. Said's intervention urges all postcolonial theorists to reconsider all those liberationist activities in the colonized world, including the feminist movement that questions the triumphant and complacent western feminist rhetoric. This paper emphasizes on the need for extending and implementing the Saidian concept of "critical consciousness" in order to develop feminist theories-theories that are reflective upon our own situations rather than using western theories to tell 'our truth'.

*North East's Tribal Women Poets Writing in English: Perspectives by and about Women*, contributed by Indasien S. Warjri presents a wonderful exposition of Northeast's tribal women poets writing in English. From mythical beings, far removed from reality, as seen in the poems of the poets hailing from Meghalaya, to women alive and breathing in society, active players of creation and living in a social order that is no stranger to strife; to a romantic soul from the hills of Arunachal, all this, and more, is compellingly brought out by the author.

*Telling ourselves into being: The art of the story*, contributed by Renee Lulam is a beautiful reflection of the intimate relationship between women and their narratives. The author vividly describes how women used narratives not only to connect and build relationships, but also to survive. This has been symbolised through the ancient story of the Sheherzade who spins her yarn around the ignoble Sultan, thereby postponing her death, and the death of numerous other women. Further, the narratives of Mizo women described by the author, are stories of extraordinary lives that refused defeat, lives that were told into survival. These reflections clearly illustrate that a woman continually saves herself and her species through the wise use of language, stories told and retold.

*Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Meghalaya* contributed by Valentina Pakyntein appraises Women Empowerment in Meghalaya by critically examining Gender Equality Index in the State. This paper presents an in-depth analysis on the concept of 'Women's Empowerment' and 'Gender Equality' and examines how these concepts relate to each other in the context

of the matrilineal society of Meghalaya. The study examines the issue of gender equity and women empowerment by highlighting the Gender related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Equality Index (GEI), as well as some aspects of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) for Meghalaya, with reference to the Indian context.

*Beyond Prescribed Roles (Shall the hen crow?) – A Brief Look at Khasi Society*, contributed by Iamon M Syiem describes of societies that are opening doors, albeit reluctantly for women, with reference to the social, economic, political and religious life. Yet, existing ground realities are difficult to ignore. She points out that however 'developed' a society may be, women still have to struggle against socially constructed impediments, to achieve certain parity with males.

S. Khyriemujat's paper entitled *Women in the Khasi Matrilineal Society*, attempts a closer look at kinship practices and how these practices are consistent with the principles and values which are at work in the wider society. This article clearly highlights the rapid and increasing transition of the family pattern in the Khasi society, from the traditional to the nuclear type of family structure. The changes that are taking place in the present day Khasi society need to be seriously re-examined in order to provide a clearer picture of the institutions, laws and the cherished customs, their use and relevance, with regards to the role of women in the Khasi society.

The paper entitled, *Matriliny and its Paradox: A Case Study of Garo Women*, contributed by L.D. Marak discusses how the position of women in the Garo society shatters the myth that the status of women is higher in a matriarchal and matrilineal society. This is clearly illustrated by the author's reflections on Jonmoni D. Shira's poem 'I, the woman'. The paper also makes references to the changes that have taken place in the present Garo society as a result of the expansion of education, development of transport and communication, technological advances and the spread of Christianity.

Amanda Basaiawmoit & Naomi C. Nonglait's article entitled, *The Role of the Khadduh*, presents a fascinating analysis of the role of the Khadduh or the youngest daughter in the Khasi matrilineal society. Dwelling on the important role that a woman plays in the Khasi society and highlighting the close cooperation and collaboration that exists between the Khasi man and the woman, this article re-evaluates the role of the Khadduh against the backdrop of widespread Christianity.

An article by H Diengdoh focuses solely on the much talked about Women's Reservation Bill. The writer has traced the journey of the Bill from its conception to its current standing, presenting arguments and counter arguments with regards to the justifications of the bill.



The article on *Political Participation and Empowerment of Women in Meghalaya*, contributed by M.P.R Lyngdoh traces the trends regarding the political participation of women in traditional bodies as well as in active politics. The paper portrays the role played by women as being more of a moral force rather than an active participation. Traditional family roles take precedence over active politics and women are yet to realize that a democracy requires participatory roles of both men and women. In this regard therefore, women need encouragement and support so that their roles are not restricted to that of the voter only, but that they may also become effective policy framers.

The article entitled, *Women's Political participation in Meghalaya Legislative Assembly From 1972 to 2008*, contributed by Vinery Solomon & Amina Marbianiang stresses that women's participation and representation in politics is an effective means for promoting democratic societies in which women are full participants and beneficiaries of national development. The history of women's participation in electoral politics in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills have also been analyzed which throws light on the Government of India Act 1935 which gave women the right to vote and made special provisions for the representation of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly. However, even though the State of Meghalaya has reached its 40<sup>th</sup> year of existence, yet, the number of women participating in active politics is still very less as indicated by the study.

The last paper contributed by Ibakitbok S. Kharkongor entitled, *Status and Changing Power Structure of Women in Meghalaya*, have revealed that in Meghalaya, there is a change of perception, attitude and behavior pattern in terms of gender roles. The various factors such as education, mass media, law, social organization, political programmes and policies have been responsible for bringing about the changes in women's perception and participation.

*Evakorlang Kharkongor  
Indasien Warjri*

## Women – Biologically Strong and Balanced

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*Malay Dey*

The age-old problems of Indian women such as child marriage, sati system, prohibition on widow remarriage, purdah system, *etc.* have almost disappeared, barring a few strange stray incidents. But, the evanescence of these problems seems to have provided room for some other modern day atrocities against women such as rape, molestation, dowry harassment, immoral trafficking, sexual exploitation at the work place and many more. Oppression begins even before birth; illegal elimination of the female foetus against the consent of the mother is another rising issue in modern India. As they journey through life, many of our daughters, sisters and mothers go through several kinds of physical and psychological torture. The question thus arises – When did such attitudes emerge? And, do we inherit these attitudes?

Available literatures indicate that during the Vedic times, there was no discrimination of gender (Kamat, 1980). Women had full freedom for spiritual and intellectual development. Daughters were initiated into Vedic education and many became scholars, orators, poets and teachers. In the *Upanishad*, we find that *Gargi* and *Maitreyi* distinguished themselves in *Brahmavidya*, the highest knowledge. Marriage took place at a mature age and wives were equal partners in families. This liberal trend declined in the period that followed. The *four-varnas* based on occupation were replaced by *varna* system based on birth. The practice of women being initiated into Vedic studies by way of *Upanayana* (sacred thread) was

slowly receding. The status of women was reduced to that of the *Sudras*. By the time of the *Smritis*, women education was limited to domestic and vocational studies. However, the study of arts like dance, music and painting were encouraged. Women in the Buddhist and Jain era had comparatively more freedom to pursue the path of knowledge, and womanhood was no bar to salvation. During Ashoka's reign, many women became preceptors and nuns, even visiting neighbouring countries for the teaching of Buddhism. Rajyasri, the sister of Harshavardhana was an intelligent and distinguished woman who sat with the king as adviser. Historians presume that early foreign invasions of India may have accounted for such change (Dutt, 2001). The other reason perhaps, was the assimilation of outer influences by the adoption of rules concerning the position of women in alien customs. It is believed that during the time when Indian civilization had reached high levels of achievement, early ideas about the inferiority of the female sex had prevailed in almost every nation of the world.

With the advent of Islam in India, the status of women acquired a new form (Hussain, 2012). Abduction, forced marriage, religious conversion and similar harassments led the society to adopt preventive measures like child marriage, confinement of girls, purdah system, sati system and other such social norms. This continued oppression of women over the ages led to the evolution of male dominance. Consequently, the Vedic gender-unbiased society switched over to a male-dominated society.

Western thought about gender, from the story of Eve, to Aristotle's belief that female babies arise from cooler reproductive cells (Sagan, 1998), states that the female is a kind of unfinished male. It is less widely known that many evolutionists, including Charles Darwin, thought of women to be biologically inferior to men. Darwin referred to animal comparisons to illustrate his conclusion that evolutionary force caused men to be superior. He argued that long term natural selection pruned out the weak and that males were subjected to more selection pressures than women. The stronger, quicker and more intelligent males were more apt to hunt, bring food and defend territories. Consequently, natural selection would evolve males to a greater degree than females. Women's inferiority, a fact taken for granted by most scientists in the 1800s, was a major proof of evolution by natural selection.

Another approach to substantiate the argument that females were inferior to males was to prove that the female brain capacity was smaller.

Paul Broca (1859), one of the most eminent anthropologists concluded that the relatively small sized female brain depends in part upon her physical inferiority and in part upon her intellectual inferiority. Broca further concluded that the disparity between men's and women's brains was ever greater, which, according to him, was the result of differing evolutionary pressures upon men and passive women. By the end of the nineteenth century, female and male bodies were virtually thought of as opposites, each having different organs, different functions and even different feelings. Women's strength has been historically underestimated. Myths about physical weakness have affected women's capacities in many areas of life. The nineteenth century anatomists believed that one's sex affected every part of the body. The skeleton itself was thought to have proved the inferiority of women's physical strength.

Upon re-evaluation, major flaws were found in the evidence that proved the inferiority of women with regards to the conclusion that females were less intelligent than men. Elizabeth Fisher (1979) attacked the evolutionary theory and commented, "The difficulties of postulating theories about human origin on the actual brain organization of presumed fossil ancestors, with only a few limestone impregnated skulls – most of them bashed, shattered, and otherwise altered by the passage of millions of years – as evidence, would seem to be astronomical".

Attempts to disprove the evolutionary view that women are intellectually inferior to men challenged the core evolutionary theory. Elaine Morgan (1972) argues that the prominent evolutionary view that women are biologically inferior to men must be challenged. She stressed that evolution must be re-evaluated in order to overturn the conclusion that women are biologically inferior to men.

The long standing perception that women are 'the weaker sex' is finally changing, as extraordinary breakthroughs by elite-level women athletes shatter the remnant of the frailty myth, bringing home the truth about women's strength. A study of strength and muscle characteristics in biceps brachii and vastus lateralis of men and women revealed no significant gender difference in strength to cross sectional area (CSA) ratio in the vastus lateralis, or any motor unit characteristics (Miller *et al.*, 1999). Data suggests that the greater strength of men is primarily due to larger fibres. The greater gender differences in upper body strength were attributed to the fact that women tend to have a lower proportion of their lean tissues distributed in the upper body region.

The discovery of the hormones estrogen and testosterone, in the 1920s and 1930s, added a new dimension to the understanding of women's strength. Estrogen is produced in female ovaries and testosterone in male testis. The adrenal cortex in both males and females produce testosterone in lesser concentrations. These hormones, once thought to be important only for pregnancy, lactation and sexual drive, have profound effects on just about every organ of the human body.

Women have, on average, lesser total muscle mass than men. The greater muscle mass of men is the result of testosterone induced muscular hypertrophy. Men possess denser, stronger bones, tendons and ligaments. Men also have greater cardiovascular reserve, with a larger heart, greater lung volume per body mass, a higher red cell count and higher haemoglobin. They also have higher circulatory clotting factors. Women produce more antibodies at a quicker rate, have more white blood cells and suffer less from infectious diseases. Women also have a lower blood pressure (at least prior to menopause) and are less prone to cardiovascular diseases. The possibilities of suffering from an antisocial personality and psychopathy are also lesser in women; they are also much less likely to suffer from sex-linked recessive genetic disorders like colour blindness, haemophilia and others. Women have the fortitude, strength and stamina of going through the most painful, terrible and traumatic process of child birth, not free from the dangers of meeting death itself. Therefore, in biological terms, it would appear that there is no clear winner between men and women. All variations are meant to have a perfect balance.

Men and women differ anatomically as well as physiologically. Such differences, in all inner organs, including the brain, explain behavioural differences. The brain is masculinised from the womb by testosterone (its absence determines feminization of the brain), generating anatomical differences that explain why males find it harder to read facial expressions and yet have a higher ability to visualize objects in three dimensions or read maps, diagrams, etc.

Corpus callosum – the major white matter tract, connecting the two brain hemispheres is much wider in women, explaining why women have their brain functions more finely distributed. On the other hand, men have a more asymmetrical brain, with more specialized areas. A lesion on the left hemisphere, which can induce speech loss, is more devastating for men; and in case of a stroke on one side of the brain, a woman can

rehabilitate, while a man may have more trouble with it. This is so because women may be able to perform tasks using the other side of their brains, implying therefore, that men are more prone to senile dementia and age-related decline than women. This also explains why women have better concrete thinking capabilities while men have better abstract capabilities –of which, composition of music is but one example. This is also the reason why women prefer to repeat loudly while learning, while men learn in silence. Further, in spite of the female brain being eleven per cent lighter than the males', the IQ coefficients of women are similar to those of men. This is because men have less grey matter that processes information and more of white matter that transmits information. Women are better in expressing their emotions as their emotional thinking centres are closer to the speech centres, enabling them to verbalize their emotions; men, on the other hand, have a simpler limbic system, and their emotions are bound to actions.

Men tend to process better in the left hemisphere of the brain while women tend to process equally well in both hemispheres. This difference explains why men are generally stronger at left brain activities and approach problem-solving from task-oriented perspectives, while women solve problems more creatively and are more aware of feelings while communicating.

An area of the brain called the inferior-parietal lobule (IPL) is typically larger in men, especially on the left side, than in women. This section of the brain is thought to control mental mathematical ability, and probably explains why men perform better in mathematical tasks. Interestingly, this was the same area of Einstein's brain that was abnormally large.

Stress management is dealt differently by men and women. Men tend to have a 'fight and flight' response to stress situations, while women seem to approach such situations with a 'tend and befriend' strategy. The reason for this is rooted in hormones. The hormone oxytocin is released during stress. The female hormone estrogen tends to enhance oxytocin, resulting in a calming and nurturing feeling, while the male hormone testosterone reduces the effects of oxytocin. Evolutionists believe that the first sexual reproducers were unisexual cells that became involved in cycles of merging and separating. The first fertilization probably occurred among starving microbes that cannibalized, but did not completely devour each other, becoming instead two-in-one cells. Sexual differences evolved gradually over hundreds of millions of years and with these differences, came ways of recognising them.

Humans possess 23 pairs of chromosomes which carry inherited traits from the father and mother. Twenty two of these are alike in both sexes while the twenty third pair differs. Females have, in their cells, two of what is called X-chromosome, while males have one each of the X-chromosome and Y-chromosome. Females retain one of their X-chromosomes from the mother (received from her mother/father) and the other from the father (received from his mother). Males retain the X-chromosome from their mother (received from her mother/father) and the Y-chromosome from the father (received from his father). The Y-chromosome of a man is received exclusively from paternal lineage while the X-chromosome is from maternal lineage. In females, out of the two X-chromosomes, one is of paternal lineage while the other is maternal. The Y-chromosome contains an influential gene called SRY, which triggers embryonic development as male. Both X- and Y- chromosomes are thought to have evolved from a pair of identical chromosomes, a few hundred million years ago.

Unlike the gene-poor Y-chromosome (having fewer than 30 genes), the X-chromosome contains over 800 genes that are essential for proper development and cell viability. However, two copies of the X-chromosomes in females result in a potentially toxic double dose of X-linked genes. To correct this imbalance, mammalian females have evolved a unique mechanism of 'dosage compensation'. By way of a process called X-chromosome inactivation, one of the two Xs is inactivated into a condensed and compact structure called 'Barr body'.

The theoretical coefficient between X and Y chromosomes in ejaculates is 1:1 and it has been experimentally demonstrated that during gametogenesis (process of gamete formation), an equal number of X- and Y- bearing sperms (male gametes) are produced. However, there are differences between X and Y bearing sperms that have been used in experimental methods to separate this population. For example, the X-chromosome is larger than Y-chromosome, and therefore contains more DNA. It may be expected that differences in DNA mass between X- and Y-chromosome bearing sperms would influence swimming speed. Perhaps this, and other embryonic conditions, alter the theoretically expected sex ratio. Further, it is proposed that the expression of genes in the maternal X-chromosome in XY embryos support a more stable development during early embryogenesis as compared to XX embryos (Evdokimova *et al.*, 1999). In the latter case, normal development is

coupled with the operation of an additional mechanism for the compensation of the dose of X-linked genes. Operation of this mechanism increases the probability of disturbances in female embryos during the early stages of development and appears to be the major factor responsible for deviation of the sex ratio from the expected value.

The apparent differences between the two sexes are the results of meticulous 'make and break' evolutionary processes over millions of years; hence these sex specific characteristics signify Man and Woman- the two master pieces- equally strong. Yet women are still ill served, ill treated and poorly advantaged, not due to any biological reasons, but mostly due to social practices and perceptions. Towards society and its development, women's contributions do not fall short of any length, mass and volume than men's, nonetheless, ours is still a patrilineal culture. Truly, biology tells a more matrilineal story: the tiny DNA containing inclusions of our cells, called mitochondria, come solely from our mothers (in the ovum). Further, brain size differences have nothing to do with intelligence. Men need more neurons to control their greater muscle mass, and their larger body size is influenced by testosterone.

In the Indian context, women are not able to lead a free and independent life as their counterparts in the west. It is astonishing that Indian women, with generations of sufferings behind them, have been able to transcend traditional shells and get themselves ready to make the best use of the opportunities offered to them. Indian women are forging ahead in the fields of education and employment, and yet, they are still not equal to men. Such inequalities are not due to legal or constitutional barriers. Rather, a greater hindrance comes from social barricades. The condition is destined to prevail unless men and women together get on board to bring the desired change. Women too, have to manifest certain degrees of maleness in order to survive in the 'male dominated' world. Women need to portray a strong front in order to protect themselves from emotional and physical hurt; while at the same time, being resolute in achieving what they want from life.

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## Indian Women – A Historical Perspective

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*V.C.S. Dkhar*

When Shakespeare penned the famous quip “Frailty thy name is woman”, he must have not known that it would aptly apply to the case of the Indian woman. India has been, time and again, projected to the world as a nation that respects women. It has even been quoted at times that Indian women are known to be treated like goddesses. However, the ground reality portrays a completely opposite picture and there have been myriads of instances throughout history that women in India were ill-treated vehemently and frequently made to be the recipient of much cruel chauvinism. In fact, it has been verified that there are many situations where no semblance of equality has ever existed between men and women in the intricate context of this vast sub-continent. There are enough indisputable evidences that women face discrimination right from the womb and abortion of the female foetus is rather common. Daughters who are born ended up mostly illiterate and not really cared for. Widows dwell in decrepit isolation and neglect, usually in a back room of the house and mostly in abject living conditions. It is always a consensus that a son is often preferred as an ‘asset’, since he can earn and support the family; a daughter is a ‘liability’ since she will be married off to another family and so will not contribute financially to her parents. In such cases, the family will have to incur heavy financial losses through dowry payment when a daughter is married off. In context, women overall are degraded and despised their entire lives. Generally

speaking, women have been restricted to the role of a home-maker, a mother and a wife, notwithstanding the diverse cultural milieu prevailing anywhere in India. However, if for whatever reason she fails in any of these responsibilities, she is immediately shunted as a *pariah* and is coerced to fend for herself in activities that are nefarious in means and nature.

Appropriate and adequate data can be collected to prove such contention as we skim through the pages of history, in order to learn more about the conditions of the Indian woman. Available sources show that liberal attitude and practices pertaining to women nonetheless did exist in the early period of ancient India. Women were involved and even enjoyed prestigious status in religious and social matters. They had certain freedom of choice with regards to their partner in marriage and widows were even permitted to remarry. However it is sad to learn that this high status that women enjoyed did not last very long and never permeated every strata of society. In fact, it can be safely assumed that the so-called honourable status of women went down the drain and inevitably deteriorated in the later period of ancient India.

The position of the women reached an all-time low during the age of the *Dharmashastras*. This period saw the exclusion of women from almost every sphere of life. Child marriage was encouraged and widow remarriage was looked down upon and done away with. Sons were the sole heirs to family property and where no sons are borne, the ancestral property would usually pass on to a male next of kin. Married daughters were often cut off from having any viable connection with their parents' family, and if any issue of divorce would occur, the daughters were usually not welcomed back into their ancestral homes. The practice of *sati* or the burning of widows in the funeral pyre of their husbands was widespread. The birth of a girl child was considered as an ill-omen and families were known to quietly dispose off their new-born female infant. In the horrific event of a catastrophe, as in an earthquake, a flood, famine or war, sons were cared for as first priority and daughters were inexorably left to their own devices to fend for their own survival.

Coming to the medieval period of Indian history, one will notice a further rejection of the erstwhile lucrative position of women. Practices such as polygamy, *sati*, child marriage and ill-treatment of widows gained further momentum. The *purdah* system was imposed so rigorously then, that foreign visitors were perplexed to see only women of doubtful character around. This was because of the absurd paranoia

of Indian men who wanted to stop their women from having anything to do with foreign muslims invading India at that time. Girls were all the more restricted from receiving education lest they be influenced away from their own culture and mind-set. They were not allowed to move freely and this deteriorated their lives into mere puppets at the hands of their chauvinistic male relatives and elders. A woman was looked upon as the sole property of her father, brother, husband and in her later years, of her son.

Such was the dismal condition of the Indian woman which continued until the advent of the British. It was said that the British were shocked to find the Indian woman in such plight. This led them to make a careful study of the whole situation and noticed that the prevailing system was, to a large extent, a mere ruse for male domination of the opposite sex.

The British influence made a deep impression in the minds of a number of open-minded Indian leaders, who eventually and in certain cases reluctantly, agreed to the need for kinder and more compassionate reforms. Thus, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a wave of reforms inundated the social fabric of India through the efforts of reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and many unsung heroes who quietly crusaded for the improvement of the lot of Indian women. This was the beginning of the struggle for women emancipation which is still noticed in bouts of sporadic spurts every now and then. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a nascent women's movement which campaigned for furthering female education, raising the age of marriage for women, and the abolition of the obnoxious *purdah* system. A number of resolutions and legislative reforms were then passed which favoured women's rights. Further, the horrors of *sati* and female infanticide were made illegal through governmental intervention.

It is interesting to note that there were a number of British women who also made remarkable contributions to uplift the Indian woman. They were either *memsahibs*, who were the wives of British officials and businessmen, or missionaries, who were either single women or the wives of male missionaries. These women came to India because they were concerned about the detestable predicament of the Indian women. Mention may be made of Mary Carpenter, Annette Akroyd Beveridge, Magareth Noble, Sister Nivedita, Magareth Gillespie Cousins, and

Eleanor Rathbone. These were British women who joined the movement to 'uplift' Indian women. Their primary goal of course, was to promote female education. They were adequately aware that much opposition to female education among Indians arose from fear that it was a preface to conversion into Christianity. As such, they respected Indian concerns and carefully avoided any appearance of proselytizing. They met with Indian male reformers and urged them to secure proper education for their wives and daughters. They lobbied with British officials and presented memorials that urged the government of India to give grants to support female schools and provide female teachers for Indian girls. They themselves taught the Indian women, and through their efforts, a number of schools were opened for girls. 'Education', the British women felt, was the key to unlock the blind beliefs of the Indian women and thereby free them from evil social practices.

Thus, it was from the British period onwards that profound changes were seen in the history of women in India. We find Indian women actively involved in the struggle for social progress and political independence. Prominent among them were Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, and Aruna Asaf Ali. In fact, it was the national struggle for independence that brought the secluded, shielded and abused women of India out in the open. Unfortunately, by the end of the freedom euphoria, they were again relegated to the background of covert abuse and degradation in most parts of the newly independent nation.

Women have still remained targets of aggressive antagonism and repression, even after sixty five years of Indian independence. Years have passed, social, religious and cultural customs have changed, resulting in a marked increased percentage of literacy among women, yet, the Indian woman still continues to suffer. Even presently, women in India are subjected to physical and mental violence. Murders, rapes, dowry deaths, molestation cases and the ever so common eve-teasing are rampant violent crimes against women which are reported in India every other day. Rape is the fastest growing crime in the country and many local governmental machinery lack the expertise and the facility to counter such trauma. Cosmopolitan cities that boast of culture and advancement in many levels of civilization are also notorious for high rates of crimes and abuse against women. Dowry is still a serious issue in 21<sup>st</sup> century India, a sad reality that taints the "India shining" image. Courts are flooded with cases related to deaths due to dowry harassment

by husbands and in-laws. Child marriage continues to this day, albeit surreptitiously in many rural and semi-urban communities of the nation. Female infanticide is covertly practiced in some rural areas, whereas in the cities, sex selective abortion is practically common. The status of widows in some parts of India is so deplorable that it is noted to be one of the many forms of human rights exploitation. Indian women face domestic violence in varying shades and forms either from in-laws or even from their own kith and kin. Cases of trafficking of young girls and women are daily reports which indicate that there is more than meets the eye. They are then forced into prostitution, domestic work or child labour. Many career-oriented women frequently face sexual harassment and molestation even at work places of high and international repute.

India, the world's largest democracy, has only 60 women lawmakers in the current 543 member Lok Sabha and only 24 women MPs out of the 240 members in the Rajya Sabha. India ranks 105<sup>th</sup> position in the world according to the latest comparative data released by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. This sordid picture of women's participation in politics in the country has led women activists to demand greater political representation and call for the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill that promises 33 % reservation to women in India.

But, to say that the women of India have made no progress in the sixty five years of independence will be nothing but blatant cynicism. In spite of the prevailing deplorable circumstances and unrelenting opposition, women of India have come forward, have strived ahead and have achieved goals. They looked upon barriers as challenges, they paid the price to overcome them and many have reached the pinnacle of their respective fields. Today, Indian women have excelled in each and every area of their vocation and have even proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that they can even better their peers from other nations. There is no arena which remains unconquered by the Indian woman. It is no longer strange today that one finds women engineers, politicians, or even army officers, professions which at one point of time, were in the domain of men. The past few decades have indeed been periods of emancipation in which the women of India have made their presence felt. We find important names like Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patil, Meira Kumar, Mamta Banerjee, Mayawati, Sheila Dikshit, Sushma Swaraj, J. Jayalalitha besides many others, who have been active in the political field. We have women like Vijay Lakshmi Pandit

who was the first woman president of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953. Isha Basant Joshi who was the first IAS officer of independent India. Sucheta Kriplani, who was the first woman chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. Kiran Bedi who was the first woman IPS officer in 1972. India is proud of its women like Bachendri Pal who was the first Indian woman to have successfully surmounted the highest mountain peak, Mt Everest, in 1984. Kalpana Chawla who was the first Indian- born woman to enter space in 1997. Sania Mirza who was the first Indian woman to have won a Grand Slam title in 2003. Mary Kom who was the first woman to be honoured with the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award, Arjuna Award in 2004, conferred the Padmashri Award in 2006, and bronze medal winner in the Olympics 2012. Roshni Nadar, CEO of HCL Corporation, who was voted as the most successful business tycoon at the young age of twenty-seven. Then, there is Chanda Kochchar who heads ICICI Bank in the country. These are to mention but a few; there are still many others who have excelled in different fields by their own mettle and grit. Thousands others have opted to remain in the background, quietly sacrificing and suffering so that others may have the opportunity that was not given to them. These are the grandmothers, the mothers, and the aunts who have made sure, even in their death-beds, that their daughters, their grand-daughters and their nieces are better fielded in a world of opposition and bigotry against females.

Thus, if on the one hand, Indian women are climbing the ladder of success, on the other, they are still suffering the violence inflicted on them. There is no doubt that compared to the past, the modern day Indian woman has reached considerable levels of achievement, yet there are still miles to go. Women of India still have to fight the harsh, cruel, exploitative world that sees women as mere vessels of producing children. One cannot say what an "India tomorrow" will be, but one can hope for a "better India" in which "gender discrimination" will never be a repeated practice. Much applause have been heard for "HIM", let us also hear applauses for "HER". But the only way for that fiction to become a reality in India is to no longer watch and wait, but to pray and fight and make sure that every female-child, girl and woman is given the right and the privilege to live in free India as a rightful citizen.

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# 3

## Women's Education in India

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*S.M. Sungoh*

### **Introduction**

Education is the process of becoming critically aware of one's reality in a manner that leads to effective action upon it. Education plays an important role in the development and survival of women. It also enables women to use their potential to a maximum extent, tells them how to think, how to work properly and how to make decisions. It is a productive and beneficial factor, developing in women a meaningful outlook on their lives. Education transforms women's lives, equips them with all the needed attributes for a proper lifestyle, initiates them into a social well being and has a remarkable effect on their personalities. It involves the gathering of knowledge in whatever aspects, and helps extract the best out of their minds and spirits. Education plays a vital role in their personal growth. It empowers them and facilitates their making a noticeable mark in any field. It is one's education therefore, which decides what one can make of one's life.

Further, education helps women claim their rights and realise their potential in the economic, political and social arenas. It also plays the important role of laying the foundation for adult life. It should therefore be an intrinsic part of any strategy to address the gender-based discrimination against women and girls, a fact prevalent in many societies.

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, it has been recognised that every individual has the right to education. The right to free and compulsory, good quality primary education, without discrimination, has been reaffirmed in all major international human rights conventions. These rights have been further elaborated to address issues like quality and equity, moving forward the issue of what the right to education means, and exploring how it can be achieved. States must ensure that basic education is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable for all. As such, greater access to education must be ensured for women in the educational system and gender sensitivity developed. The right of girls to education is thus, one of the most critical rights – as education plays an important role in enabling girls and women to secure other rights.

Cultural and traditional values stand between girls and their prospects of education. The successful implementation of girls' 'right to education' would be able to address some of society's deeply rooted inequalities, which condemn millions of girls to a life without quality education – and therefore, all too often, to a life of missed opportunities. Improving educational opportunities for girls and women help them to develop skills that allow them to make decisions and influence community change in key areas.

### **Need for Women Education**

Women Education can only be achieved through the provision of adequate and functional education to women. Without an effective, efficient, adequate and functional education for all its citizens, education which is relevant to its immediate needs, goals and objectives, a nation would find it difficult to stand on its own, no matter how rich or vast the nation is. The brand of education being advocated is that type of education in which is embedded the spirit of self realization and all that is needed for a country's overall development, like mass literacy, economic empowerment *etc* (Esere, 2001).

Purposeful occupational achievement and satisfaction is ensured by a deep self-awareness and an understanding that comes only through an effective and functional education, guidance and counselling; thus the need for women's education. This is likely to guarantee women empowerment such that it entails the process of challenging power

relations and of gaining wider control over the source of power. This, however, cannot be achieved without the provision of reasonable access to formal and functional education of women; and is based on the premise that education has been adjudged to be a viable instrument of change in the positive direction.

The progress of the literacy rate in India during the Pre-Independence and Post-Independence period shows that more emphasis should still be made on Women's Education. (Table 3.1)

**Table 3.1 Showing the Literacy Rate in India**

Year	Persons (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)
1901	5.3	9.8	0.7
1911	5.9	10.6	1.1
1921	7.2	12.2	1.8
1931	9.5	15.6	2.9
1941	16.1	24.9	7.3
1951	16.7	24.9	7.3
1961	24.0	34.4	13.0
1971	18.7	39.5	18.7
1981	36.2	46.9	24.8
1991	52.1	63.9	39.2
2001	65.38	76.0	54.0
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

Source: Census of India 2011

Table 3.1 above shows that during the pre-independence period, the literacy rate for women (0.7%) was very poor in comparison to the literacy rate of men (9.8 %). The literacy rate of women has risen from 0.7 % in 1901 to 7.3 % in 1941, and 65.46% in 2011, where as the literacy rate of men has risen from 9.8 % in 1901 to 24.9 % in 1941, and 82.14 % in 2011. During the post-independence period, literacy rates have shown a substantial increase in general. However, from this table it can be stated that, the literacy rate of women still needs improvement in comparison to that of the males.

## **Importance of Women's Education in India**

Women's education in India plays a very important role in the overall development of the country. It not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but also in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Educated women not only tend to promote the education of their girl children, but can also provide better guidance to all their children. Moreover, educated women can help reduce both the infant mortality rate and growth of the population.

The National Policy on Education (1986) has recommended promoting empowerment of women through the agency of education, considered to be a land mark in the approach to the education of illiterate women. The National Literacy Mission is another positive step towards the eradication of illiteracy in the age group of 15-35 years. Women's education has assumed a special significance in the context of India's planned development, as it is incorporated in every Plan period as a major programme for the development of women. Universalization of elementary education, enrollment and retention of girls in schools, promotion of *balwadies*, raising the number of schools and colleges of arts, science, and professional institutions for girls, polytechnics, girls' hostels, multipurpose institutions and adult education programmes, are some of the steps taken by both central and state governments in India to boost-up women's education.

Education is a potent tool for the emancipation and empowerment of women. The greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society is education. Education is indispensable to a woman, not only to acquire more knowledge about the world outside her hearth, but to also help her gain status, positive self esteem, self confidence, courage and inner strength necessary to face the challenges of life. Apparently, it also facilitates them to procure a job, supplement the family income and achieve social status. Education, especially of women, has a major impact on health and nutrition as an instrument of developing a sustainable strategy for population control. Educated women can play an equally important role as men in nation building. Thus, there is no denying the fact that education empowers women. Indeed, the different organs of the United Nations as well as experts on women's liberation argue for women's education as being the basic step to attain equality with men.

Educating girls and women is an important step in overcoming poverty. Inequality and poverty are not inevitable. Since the beginning of the Women's Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement, the role of women in society has expanded. Thus, one alludes to equality in all areas of education, equality in the workplace, equal pay, equal representation and equal opportunities for all women.

Unequivocally, Women's Education has assisted in improving the quality of life for women. Women's history is veritably an extensive one, laden with strives and struggles, barriers, discriminations, demands, changes and oppositions. In all this however, education has led the way to women's empowerment. Inherently being care givers, nurturers, and providers, women's education has however expanded the role of women to fit descriptions of women as mentors, motivators, educators and leaders.

Basic education provides girls and women with an understanding of basic health, nutrition and family planning, offering them choices and powers to decide over their own lives and bodies. Women's education leads directly to better reproductive health, improved family health, economic growth both for the family and the society, as well as lower rates of child mortality and malnutrition.

Women's Education can therefore help in increasing literacy rates among women, increasing early childhood development interventions, increasing women's labour force, participating in and strengthening labour policies affecting women, improving women's access to credit, land and other resources, promoting women's political rights and participation, and expanding reproductive health programs and family support policies.

### **Qualities of Educated Women**

1. *Self-responsible*: accountable for own actions; internal locus of control.
2. *Self-motivated*: driven by internal, personal goals, and derives internal satisfaction from achievements.
3. *Self-managing*: regulates own behaviour and is aware of how others are impacted by it; organized.
4. *Self-awareness*: ability to (a) see when off-course (b) asks self "what could I do differently?" and (c) do it .A good woman

should know who she is and accept every part of her as beautiful. Self-awareness brings self-assurance, which fosters other good traits.

5. *Self-confidence/self-esteem/self-efficacy*: believes in own ability to achieve/learn.
6. *Independence*: implies that a woman does not require anything else to fulfill her sense of self. She is confident in her own life and constitutes a complete person, regardless of whether or not she is in a relationship.
7. *Interdependent*: recognizes the power of asking for, and giving help.
8. *Life-long learner*: views everything as a learning experience.
9. *Emotional intelligence (EQ)*: ability to recognize emotions in self and others, and to express emotions at an appropriate level and in an appropriate manner.
10. *Responsible*: can be counted on in times of trouble and knows how to take care of problems without assistance.
11. *Kindness*: Kindness leads to trust and affection. A woman should think of others as much as herself and must treat others the way she would like to be treated.
12. *Trustworthy*: honest and not deceive those close to her.

## Problems of Women's Education

(i) *Women as under-privileged citizens*: In spite of certain outstanding examples of individual achievements, and a definite improvement in the Indian woman's general condition over the last one hundred years, it remains true that our women still constitute a large body of under - privileged citizens. Women in India still encounter distinctive problems that call for special attention.

(ii) *Barriers to Education*: There are several reasons for the low levels of literacy in India, not the least of which is the high level of poverty. Over one-third of the population is estimated to be living below the poverty line (The World Bank, 1997a). Although school attendance is free, the cost of books, uniforms, and transportation can be too much for poor families. Poor families are also more likely to keep girls at home in order to care for younger siblings or to work in family enterprises. If a

family has to choose between educating a son or a daughter because of financial constraints, typically the son will be chosen. Negative parental attitude towards educating daughters can also be a barrier to a girl's education. Many parents view educating sons as an investment because the sons will be responsible for the caring of aging parents.

(iii) *Inadequate School Facilities*: Education in India lacks in adequate school facilities. Many states simply do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all of the school-aged children. Furthermore, the classrooms that are available often lack basic necessities such as sanitary facilities and water; a lack of latrines can be particularly detrimental to girls' school attendance.

(iv) *Overcrowded Classrooms*: In some states, the inadequate supply of classrooms is further compounded by the large increase in the number of school-aged children, due to high population growth rates. The need for new classrooms will persist as the population continues to grow. While increasing the supply of classrooms, state governments on the other hand, can focus on improving the quality of education.

(v) *Condition of Primary Education in Villages*: Looking at the present condition of primary education in villages, it appears doubtful that a hundred per cent enrollment of girls can be achieved by the end of this century. There is no doubt that we have made great headway in the education of women in the last century. It is however unfortunately true of our society, that children are sent to school, not according to their intelligence or aptitude, but according to their sex. Such attitudes need to be changed without further delay if a hundred percent enrollment of the primary school-going children is desired.

(vi) *The Economic Structure of Rural Areas*: The economic structure of the rural areas is such that children, especially girls, are required to help in household work and perform chores. Young girls have to look after their younger brothers and sisters, fetch water from the well, carry food to their fathers in the fields, etc. Since there is so much to be done at home, they cannot be spared for the luxury of attending school. The resources of the poor farmer are so limited that he does not have anything to spare for the education of his children. Parents do not also see the value of educating their children; especially daughters who would only get married off and become housewives. Since they cannot see any direct relationship between education and economic betterment, there is very little motivation to send their children to school.

(vii) *Lack of linkage between Economic and Social Development:* It is still not being realized that there is a definite connection between education, good motherhood and efficient house management. The management of millions of households and the upbringing of millions of children, is thus in the hands of illiterate women. It is here that a change is required if our democratic and socialistic intensions are not to remain a mere pretence. People can be motivated to have their children educated only if the educational system is directly linked with economic and social development. People will resist sending their children to school as long as our education system remains oblivious to solving the immediate problems of the masses and alienating them from their natural, social and cultural surroundings. Primary education, especially in the rural areas, should be given maximum attention. Primary education for both girls and boys is what we should be concerned about while planning our policies and allocation of funds. It is this sector of the educational structure that gets neglected in favour of all sorts of institutes of 'higher learning' and 'research', which are neither relevant nor pertinent to our pressing problems. The role of women outside the home is becoming an ever essential feature of our present day reality.

## Conclusion

Women's education in India therefore plays a pivotal role in the development of the country. It can help in reducing the mortality rate of infants in India. Educated women will be able to handle their families better; women education in India therefore, needs to be improved. Everyone needs a well-rounded education. Education can increase the awareness of women on political, social and economic matters, just to name a few. It stimulates the mind, for the human brain has an amazing capacity to learn and assimilate from the simplest of chores to the most complex and abstract of thoughts.

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# Education and the Labour Participation of Women: A Review of Literature

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## Introduction

There is a great body of literature highlighting the role and importance of education in shaping the lives of individuals. Education has been viewed as one of the tools in shaping labour market outcomes, social stratification and mobility; and the reduction of social disparities as well as value and attitude formation (Cohn, 1979; Muller and Kogan, 2010). For the past few years, the role of education has assumed importance, not only due to its capacity to improve labour market aspirations of women, but more importantly, to bridge the supply gap in employment, especially in a growing economy and narrowing gender gap. This assumes greater importance in the developing countries, as gender discrimination continues to permeate such societies. The disparities encompass diverse aspects of the everyday lives of people, ranging from education to health to participation in decision making, at home or outside. In these countries, women have never been a privileged lot and have not been treated at par with men, thus limiting their opportunities to serve as positive agents of change. (Klasen, 2002; Klasen and Wink, 2003; Boserup, 2008).

The need for raising the status of women in order to enable them to participate effectively and improve their decision-making power, both at home and outside, has led to a number of researches towards this effect.

An assessment of the status of women would be tantamount to an analysis of the roles that women play. Women's work participation and occupational distribution have been taken as indicators to assess the impact of economic development (Tansel, 2002). Labour force participation rate (LFPR) is not just an input, but also an output of the development process. The incorporation of women into the work force represents a challenge for the attainment and fulfillment of the goals of contemporary welfare states, not only from a quantitative but also a qualitative point of view. At the same time, a greater need for integration of women into the development process is also required for the achievement of economic and social development (ILO, 1980; UNDP, 1995).

The following sub-sections briefly discuss the extent of female labour force participation, as well as a review of the literature on the linkage between education and labour force participation of women.

### **Extent of Female Participation in the Labour Force**

An examination of the participation rates of women in the labour force points to one single fact, that of a large variation in the participation rates of women compared to men. While LFPR of women in developed nations is observed to be at much higher levels, it is not so in the developing nations. Undoubtedly, the participation of women in the labour market has increased over time, yet differences continue to persist in diverse areas of work. Social and economic development affects men and women in different ways, producing various changes in the nature of work between them.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1980 estimated that, out of a total of about 1,800 million workers, women accounted for over one-thirds, that is, 600 million women workers. The highest female participation rates for ages 15 years and above, was in the former USSR at 60 per cent, while, in the European centrally planned economies, it was about 50 per cent. The lowest, then, was in the Latin American countries which stood at about 24 per cent and about 4 per cent in North Africa (ILO, 1985). McMahon (1986) compared the labour force participation of women in six countries, *viz.*, United States, Japan, West Germany, Canada, Australia and Sweden for the period from 1977 to 1984. He noted that labour force participation rate (LFPR), for women had risen in all the six countries. Between 1975 and 1984, the participation rate of prime aged women (25 to 54 years) rose by 12 to 16 percentage points

for all countries. Further, in 1984, female LFPR was the lowest at 55 per cent in Australia and the highest at 88.1 per cent in Sweden. The same trend of increasing participation of women in the labour force in the developed countries has also been reported (Ehrenberg and Smith, 2000; Toossi, 2002; Ferber et al., 2006). Examining women's work participation in India since 1951, Dutt and Sundharam, (1998) reported that female participation rates were much lower than male participation rates, in spite of an improvement in women's participation rates over the years.

One important aspect of the difference in women's participation between countries was the role played by certain factors. For instance, Brusentsev (2006) analyzed the labour force participation of women in the United States from 1967 to 2003 and found that, since 1990, the increased participation of women in the labour force had slowed down from previous decades. Adverse labour market conditions were the main factors which impacted employment choices of women and hence, responsible for the slowing down effect. Other factors, such as improved educational attainment, and the need to contribute to the family income, were responsible for rising female labour force participation rates over the last few decades. A similar finding was also reported by Hotchkiss (2006), where it was reported that after decades of consistent increase, the labour force participation of women in the United States flattened out in the late 1990s and declined after 2000.

While the variations between countries were much noticeable, variations within different regions of a country were also present. Ozdemir and Yucesan-Ozdemir (2004) showed that urban women in Turkey had a lower participation rate compared to the rural women. Similarly, a report by the Government of Canada in 2004 pointed out that, women in the Western provinces of Canada and Ontario were more likely to be employed than those from other parts of the country. However, in all provinces, women had lower levels of employment compared to men.

## **Education and Labour Participation**

The role of education and its benefits to the individual receiving the education has been given due importance by researchers. It is noted that the main benefit of education is in improving the capacity of an individual to be able to earn an income. Besides, education directly benefits society as well, where it benefits individuals who have obtained its services

(Leftwich and Sharp, 1984). While placing importance on the role of education in the labour market experiences of individuals, much has been highlighted on what that role could possibly be. Individuals receiving an education while having the potential to improve their lives are also severely constrained by a number of factors, poverty being the most important of all.

#### **A. Empirical Studies on the Impact of Education on Female Labour Participation**

Cohn (1979) accredited the importance of education in determining the economic and social success of an individual. While emphasizing on the role of education in raising the productivity and earnings of the individuals receiving the education, he also focused on the social benefits of education. These are benefits that the individual concerned cannot appropriate, but are accrued to other members of the society. Most importantly, he highlighted the 'intergeneration effect' of education where, persons are more likely to complete a given educational level provided that their parents have also equally received higher education. The effect would also eventually lead to an increase in potential income for the persons concerned.

Standing (1982) explored the relationship between education and labour force participation of women. He asserted that it would be more likely for highly educated women to enter the work force, even though there cannot be any prior justification for expecting them to have a higher probability for participation in the labour market. The direct and indirect influences of education were also highlighted. The former included the enhancement of opportunities for employment, such as the postponement of marriage and child bearing and the higher propensity for migration; while the indirect effects were, increased opportunity cost of women's economic activity, higher reservation wage, which could lead to an aversion for women employment in the informal sector.

Gregory et al., (1985) in their analysis of women in the Australian labour force, have shown a high participation rate among women with higher educational attainment. It was shown that participation rates were positively related to educational levels, and women with university degrees were twice more likely to be employed, compared to women with less than 10 years of schooling. It was further shown that the participation of married women increased by almost forty-five percentage

points during 1975. This in fact, was the major contributor to the increased women participation in the labour force; further, 90 per cent of the increase was attributed to women employed part time.

Lichter and Costanzo (1987) pointed out that in the United States, the educational up-gradation of the female population had been one of the major forces of social change in the country. For women aged 25 or over, the median years of schooling increased from 12.1 to 12.6 years between 1970 and 1980, and the percentage of graduates from high school also increased from 52.8 to 65.8 during the same period. This increase in the educational level altered the outlook of women towards household work, and manifested itself in the form of increased work participation for women with higher educational attainment.

Joekes (1991) examined the impact of education on the participation of women in the developed countries of South-east Asia, which included Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea. The study concluded that the respective countries' economic growth was largely due to the influence of early attention paid to the education of women. This eventually resulted in the higher proportion of women workers in the labour force at large, and the industrial workforce in particular.

Nam (1991) analysed the determinants of female labour force participation in Seoul, South Korea for the period 1970 to 1980. The analysis showed that educational levels and economic status were the main factors that influenced women's entry into the labour force. A higher educational attainment among women led to their higher participation, whereby participation rates increased from 14.6 per cent in 1970 to 23.5 per cent in 1980. This increase in participation was also attributed to an expansion in the Korean economy, which necessitated the need for a more educated workforce. This was filled by women who had the requisite educational qualifications. It was also shown that, women from lower economic backgrounds had a higher probability of participation compared to those coming from higher economic backgrounds.

While examining the quality of schooling and the outcomes on the labour market, Case and Yogo (1999), estimated the returns to education for the population between 24 and 34 years of age. Using the 1996 South African Census data, the results of the regression analysis on completed years of schooling for marital status, age, current residence and district

of origin, showed that the probability of employment was two to three times as large for women, as it was for men, depending upon the quality of schooling received by them.

Klasen (2002), using cross-country and panel regression, investigated gender inequality in education and its eventual impact on economic growth. It was pointed out that gender inequality in education directly affected the economic growth of a country by lowering the average level of human capital, and indirectly, through investments and population growth. These observations were made for South and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. The findings showed that gender inequality in education accounted for 0.77 percent of the growth difference between South and East Asia, 0.44 percent between Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia and 0.69 percent between the Middle East, North Africa and East Asia. It was suggested that the promotion of gender equality in education would not only contribute to the advancement of the nation, but also help in the promotion of human development goals, lowering mortality and fertility rates.

Spohr (2003) sought to examine the extension of compulsory education at the junior level, and its impact on the labour market outcome of individuals. The findings reported a strong linkage between the two. Further, an additional year of schooling raised the probability of higher earnings, and it had a stronger effect for females. The introduction of such compulsory formal education also raised the employment prospects for individuals from socially marginalized families. Also, it enabled educated individuals to obtain employment in both government and private sectors.

Self and Grabowski (2004) examined the impact of education on income growth in India for the period 1966 to 1996. Gross enrollment data and educational attainment of the population aged 15 years and above was used, and time series techniques (simple and partial correlation) were applied to determine the impact of each educational category (primary, secondary and tertiary) on income growth. Their findings revealed a positive relation between education and growth, with a strong causal relation with primary educational level, a weak relation with secondary educational level and none for tertiary level education. Further, they found that while females at all levels of education, had a strong potential for generating growth, males had a strong causal impact only at the primary and a weak causal impact at the secondary level, respectively.

Sackey (2005) examined the effects of education on the labour participation of women in Ghana. It was pointed out that the decision whether to participate or not in the labour market, depended, to a very great extent, on schooling, as well as the cost of living. While pointing out that participation rates of women had exhibited an increase, it was accompanied by a decline in fertility rates at the same time. This was mainly due to an improvement in the educational status of women - both in terms of enrollment and years of schooling - which improved their labour market prospects, as well as postponement in the age of marriage. It was further suggested that, efforts towards narrowing the gender gap in education in order to ensure benefits and gains for women, needed to be sustained and intensified, to facilitate over-all improvement in women's lives and their families.

Euwals et al., (2007) had similar views on the effects of education on participation rates of women. In their analysis, they found that a high level of education resulted in higher probability of participation. Further, favourable market conditions facilitated women's entry into the labour market and contributed to one-eighth of the total growth in the participation rates. This also resulted in wives participating in the labour market, if their husbands were unemployed. Other factors like lesser number of children, lower unemployment rates, etc. also contributed to increased participation. On the other hand, unfavourable market conditions led to potential market participants withdrawing themselves from the labour market.

Chiappori et al., (2009) explored the impact of education not only in relation to labour market returns to schooling, but in terms of the marriage market. They corroborated that education positively impacted in terms of higher returns as compensation for additional years of schooling. They extended their work to the marriage market and observed that the expected share from marriage not only induced women to receive higher education, but also induced them to fully internalize the gains from their premarital investments. Also, the proportion of educated women that marry increased, as they were released from household chores.

## **B. Returns to Education**

Much of the studies outlined above, all point to the fact that there are higher employment possibilities for women with higher education. Investment on education is made with a view that the economic returns



far outweigh the investments made in education. Studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between educational levels and wages. Higher the levels of educational attainment of individuals, higher are the wages. The returns to schooling are lower for primary educated as compared to higher returns for college educated workers. (Cohen and House, 1994; O'Neill, 1995). However, disparities in the earnings between men and women persist, and the economic returns for men are far higher than for women. Besides, women are largely restricted to low paying jobs and spend a substantial amount of time in household activities (Carlson and Persky, 1999; Glinskaya and Mroz, 2000; Hersch and Stratton, 2000; Kunze, 2003). For instance, Baraka (1999) examined the returns to education in Taiwan for the period 1979 to 1995. Using regression analysis, the author found that women were less rewarded at lower levels of schooling and better rewarded at higher levels, while men's earnings declined at higher educational levels. It was reported that men with university degrees saw a decline in their earnings from 36 percent to 29 percent above those with middle school graduate degrees.

Research has also shown the importance of not just education but skill acquisition and experience, as a major determinant of labour participation. Using data from the National Adult Literacy Survey, Ishikawa and Ryan (2002) examined the relationship between schooling and earnings in the United States. Basic skills were divided between those acquired through schooling and those acquired otherwise, also termed as credentials. These were included as independent variables in estimating the effects of schooling on wages and earnings. The study found that substance of learning in school or the accumulated human capital, accounted for higher earnings as compared to credentials. Further, the strength of human capital versus credential returns to schooling, also varied by race. A large variation among ethnic groups was also found in the study, regarding earnings and basic skills acquired through schooling. The largest return was realized by white females and males and Hispanic females, while it was lowest for the blacks. (See also Dearden et al., 2002; Glewwe, 2002). Pauw et al., (2008) also pointed to the importance of skills and work experience, besides educational attainment, as a factor for absorption in the labour market. They emphasized on the improvement in the quality of schooling, and the choice of an appropriate type of education for an enhancement of the employability of individuals. It was highlighted that in 2005, individuals with qualifications in physical,

mathematical, computer and life sciences, accounted for 22.2 per cent of the unemployed, followed by human and social studies with 20.6 per cent and business, commerce and management studies with 19.1 per cent, respectively.

On the other hand, research also suggests that when the educational system expands more quickly than the demand for skilled labour, the returns to schooling can decline (Bartlett 1978). Angrist (1995) showed that, as education increased rapidly in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from 1981 to 1987, wage premiums for the most educated men dropped, apparently because the labour market had an oversupply of skilled workers. This was done with the expectation that a more educated population was the answer to solving the country's economic problems, and that education would lead to economic growth. However, upon culmination of their studies, these educated job-seekers had no labour positions to enter into. The result was a high number of unemployed and underemployed educated individuals. Many of the educated, who had completed secondary school and received employment, were employed in the lower levels of the job market as unskilled manual workers. Besides, the educated men and women were ambitious about the type of job they were prepared to accept, as opposed to the illiterates who accepted any job in sight. Moreover, women were often employed in occupations which would not be taken up by men (Boserup, 2008; Yabiku and Schlabach, 2009).

### **C. Access to Education**

For education to become an effective tool to bring about changes, it is imperative that women have the benefit of receiving an education. The following studies reviewed show that, access to education differs for women as compared to men, as well as affecting the levels of living of the households.

In the case of developing countries where there are strong patriarchal influences, employment opportunities for women are seriously restricted due to the prevalent cultural and social practices. The preferential treatment given to male children induces parents to provide more schooling for their sons rather than for their daughters. Moreover, the opportunity cost of sending daughters to school is greater than for sons, as females are typically responsible for domestic chores. This leads them to truncate their education earlier than males, thus, reducing their

chances at work participation. The conflict between the pursuit of education and career roles with the pursuit of family roles, adversely impact women, leading to their abandonment of schooling at an early age. (Behrman et al, 1989; Kalbaugh, 1991; Beutel and Axinn, 2002; Holmes, 2003). Additionally, in some countries, when a woman marries, her family affiliations change from that of her father's to that of her husband's. Therefore, parents consider education more as a cost, than as an investment whose benefits will be reaped other than by the parents themselves (Meier and Rauch, 2000). Finally, in some cultures, like that found amongst the Muslims for instance, young girls are discouraged from interacting with males, once puberty is reached. A lack of 'all-girls' schools and female teachers also act as deterrents for girls to continue compulsory education, and hence, to working outside their homes (Alderman et al. 1996; Holmes 2003; Khan, 2007; Sarikhani, 2008).

Finally, the place of residence also influences the access to education. Studies have shown that rural residents have lower educational attainment compared to urban residents (Tansel, 2002). For example, in India, the educational attainment of boys and girls in the rural areas is only 46.13 per cent compared to 73 per cent in the urban areas (Census, 2001). Chanana (2000), for instance, also noted that in urban India, parents have no objection to girls continuing higher education, as it is considered an investment for their security in future, which, however, is not the case in the rural areas. Such findings reflect the inadequacies and drawbacks towards education in the rural areas.

### **Barriers to Educational Attainment**

The acquisition of an education and consequently, labour market participation for women, even with its higher and better prospects, is much limited by poverty as well as by social and cultural barriers.

The level of educational attainment, while being positively related to the income and wealth of households, is also limited by poverty, as poverty negatively affects educational investments and learning. Children from poor families were three times more likely to drop out of school. In comparison with boys, it was also noted that girls had a higher probability of being held back and dropping out of school at the primary school level. Further, poorer households are more likely to invest in the schooling of older children, in favour of the education of their younger siblings. On the other hand, richer households' demand for education increases with

the increase in their wealth (Brown and Park, 2002; Sengupta and Guha, 2002; Glewwe and Jacoby, 2004; Thomas et al., 2004). Lopez (2009) showed that the expansion in higher education system disproportionately benefits children from relatively rich and well educated families. The results of the logit model show that, inspite of the disappearance of universities only for the elite, socioeconomic variables heavily influence the demand for university education. Thus, equality of opportunities in education has not been completely achieved.

The cultural traditions shaping women's roles vary across class, caste, regional and religious groups. While women's work in their homes may be considered universal in each society, such work is largely shaped by the cultural traditions prevailing in such societies (Paulson, 1984). With regards to labour market participation, a large variation exists among women, who are largely influenced by the prevailing traditions and customs in society. Women's participation in employment is not only mediated by gender, but also by religion, caste and ethnicity. In examining the expected vis-à-vis actual work roles of women, Rexroat and Shehan (1984) investigated the effect of long term work plans on actual work plans, for women who expressed their future work role plans in 1968, and 'would be 35' in 1980. The analysis was carried out for a cohort of women who were thirty-five years of age in 1980. The results of the findings showed that attitudes towards women's employment, employment experience, marital and fertility characteristics, all affected women's employment. While employment experience influenced the labour force status of those anticipating employment, socio-demographic characteristics (educational attainment, marital status and the attitude towards women's work by the husband) also affected their employment. The study also reported that women, who anticipated market activity, were highly likely to be in the labour market by the age of thirty-five, regardless of their marital or fertility status. Using panel data for 97 countries, from the year 1960 to 2000, Bloom et al., (2007) examined the effects of fertility on the participation rate of women. The labour market participation covered all age groups between 15 to 19 years and 60 to 64 years of age respectively, in five-year age increments. The empirical findings showed that the effect of fertility on female labour supply was the strongest during the ages 20 to 39 years. Also, with each additional child, the participation rate for women declined by about 10 to 15 percentage points in the age group 25 to 39 years, and about 5 to 10

percentage points for those in the age group 40 to 49 years. This indicated that higher the fertility rate, lower will be the work participation, even for women in the older age groups.

## **Conclusion**

The brief review of literature highlights the positive and negative impact of education, not just on the individual receiving it, but also for the prospects of labour market participation. A higher educational attainment for individuals in general, and women in particular, has the potential for boosting their labour market performance as well as their wages; it also positively impacts several other spheres of women's lives, such as the marriage market. However, the societal and cultural norms (besides poverty), prevalent in different societies, act not just as a hindrance to their receiving education, but also inhibit their effective participation in the work force. Besides gender discrimination, distinction in wage accruing between men and women, and skill differences, hamper women's further individual and professional growth.

On the one hand, economic development and increasing expenditure in education can boost up chances for reducing inequalities and bridging the gender gap (Semyonov, 1980; Pampel and Tanaka, 1986; Goldin and Katz, 2001; Sylwester, 2002). On the other hand, a multitude of roles that women play is largely unaccounted for, or undervalued. For instance, Beneria (1981) noted that in most societies, women's work is regarded as secondary and of low value. This is because an important proportion of women's work is unpaid, leading to an under-estimation of the contributions made by women. As such, their participation in economic activities, according to conventional definitions, is not recognized, thereby undervaluing women's work.

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# 5

## Women Empowerment – Indian Perspective

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*Brinda Bazely Kharbirymbai*

### **Introduction**

Women constitute nearly half of the world's population but it is observed that in a majority of cultures, their roles and functions in society largely depend on men. The same can be said of Indian society, where the position of women has been very poor since ancient times. Women were totally dependent and were exposed to all kinds of social evils, like sati, dowry, child marriage and others. The status of the Indian woman has been aptly described by Sapru as "when young she depends on her father, after marriage on her husband and in old age, her son"<sup>1</sup>. However, since independence, women have held more responsible roles resulting in them becoming more career and education oriented.

There is a pressing need to uplift women and educate them on important issues related to social, economic, political and legal matters. This is because, basically, women are the builders of society, and as pointed out by Gustav Geiger, "... women in society is an accurate index of the development of that society"<sup>2</sup>. This implies that the progress of a

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1. Sushma Sapru – Socio-Economic status of Women, 1989, Asish Publishing House, New Delhi, Pg. 232.
  2. Joshi, S.C. – Women Empowerment myth and reality, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi.

country can be gauged by the advancement in the status of its womenfolk. In other words, if a country wants to overcome the obstacles associated with poverty and development, the empowerment of women is necessary at every step.

Women's empowerment, also known as gender empowerment means equipping women to be economically independent and self reliant, to have a positive self esteem, enabling them to face difficult situations and to participate in developmental activities and make concrete decisions. This empowerment can come about by only one crucial factor, and that is good quality education.

Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which powerless persons gain greater control over their lives. This control could be in terms of material assets and intellectual resources. Studies have shown that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. This is because empowerment leads to awareness, which in turn leads to greater participation and most importantly develops women's psychological levels and the power to resist.

The advent of globalization and liberalization has led to the advancement in technology and growth in economies, making way for opportunities in the labour market. As such, women empowerment has been conducive to advancement; entire nations, business communities and groups can benefit from the implementation of programmes and policies for women empowerment.

### **Indian Perspective**

India is a developing country with a current population of 1.21 billion (2011). The population of males is 623.7 millions and that of females being 586.5 millions thereby, showing the sex ratio of 940 females per 1000 males. The principle of gender equality is clearly pointed out in the Indian Constitution with regards to fundamental rights, duties and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of indiscriminate in favour of women.<sup>3</sup>

The Indian government has also implemented various democratic policies, laws, plans and programmes, specifically aimed at women's

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3. Bhuyan Dasarathi – Empowerment of Indian Women: A Challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, *Osissa Review* 2006.

advancement in different spheres. Now, India has a number of non-government organizations (NGO's) with a widespread network, basically to secure Indian women's rights, concerns and positions in the society. In India, women empowerment started as an important slogan in the 1990's. Since then, various NGO's have emerged and various schemes have been developed. Women empowerment in India first received national and international recognition when the Congress government launched the Indira Mahila Yojana and when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) incorporated the issue of women upliftment as one of its Primary objectives. Human development report since 1999 revealed that no country in the world should treat women as material beings. In India, however, caste and class still plays an important role, which leads to the failure of development. Now, the general idea is changing and no distinction is made in matters of education for boys and girls.

Nevertheless, women's empowerment is still ridden with problems related to cultural and ethical issues, educational problems, gender disparity, low confidence, poverty, ignorance and lack of opportunities. For instance, very few women received awards, recognitions and academic fellowships. Therefore, India needs to make up in terms of women empowerment and not deny opportunities to women. Policies need to be framed and implemented with all urgency and collective determination as women have to face many challenges, beginning from early childhood and lasting their entire lifespan.

## **Pathways for Women's Empowerment**

### *Women's Education*

Women in India have a much lower literacy rate than men. Far fewer girls are enrolled in schools and many of them are drop outs. As per the 2001 census, the literacy rate of women in India is 50%. The literacy rate of women in India as per 2011 census is 65.46%.

The government of India has expressed deep concern to educate Indian women for the all round development of the nation. More and more women are enrolled in higher education. In the year 2006 -2007, out of the total enrolment of 110.28 lakhs, the number of women students was 44.66 lakhs or 40.4% of the total enrollment. Out of the total number of women enrolled in higher education, 12.35% were enrolled in professional courses. Some major government agencies such as Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Ministry of Women and

Child Welfare, UGC, DST, CSIR *etc.* are constantly reviewing the status of women in higher education and employment. It has been observed that the share of women in terms of enrollment in higher education is increasing, though stagnation has been observed in technological areas and allied fields; domestic responsibilities continue to compel women to forgo their dreams of achieving higher goals.

### *Gender Disparities*

Women face severe specific barriers to success and achievement especially in terms of socio-economic, cultural, political and structural matters. Among the major disparities are early marriage, negative attitude towards girls, cultural taboos, resistance in all aspects, moral codes and others. In many societies, women's opinions in any matter are not considered important; thus making them very passive. Such mindsets should be removed in order to pave way for self confidence in women.

Gender disparity is noticed even in the workforce. In the service sector, requisite skill-based workforce is required. There is a constant need to upgrade the existing skill of the women workforce so as to be at par with the opposite sex.

It has also been accepted that the creative talent and intellectual potential of women in the workforce be explored at all levels. It has to be realized that anti-discriminatory and gender opportunities should be provided to women. Various policies and schemes should be implemented so as to do away with gender discrimination. Gender disparity is also seen in the enrollment of women in higher education. This is clearly shown in the table 5.1 provided below –

**Table 5.1 Enrollment of Women in Higher Education**

Stages	2000 – 01	2001 – 02	2002 – 03	2003 – 04	2004 – 05
Diploma/Certificate	32.70	35.80	33.74	33.80	40.08
Graduate	37.50	40.90	39.93	40.10	40.41
Post Graduate	39.50	42.20	42.04	42.18	40.39
Research	36.10	38.90	37.95	39.04	39.98

Source – UGC annual report.<sup>4</sup>

4. Wizarat Kausar – University News. Vol-45, No.50. Pg.13.

The Ministry of Labour, Government of India, has pointed out that whatsoever the stage of economic or social development of a country, three factors prevail which lead to women joining the work force. These are:-

1. Inadequate income of the principal earner.
2. Death of the bread earner.
3. Women's desire for economic independence; or for securing higher standards of living.

It has been generally observed that employment in the services sector is not gender neutral and is influenced, dominated and controlled by men. It is also observed that most women find the working environment unfriendly and insecure. Gender disparity has an adverse effect on working women. This is due to the biological differences and traditional mindsets about the responsibilities of women as mothers and homemakers.

### **Empowerment in Science and Technology**

Unlike in the west, it has been noticed in India that very few women opt for science and technology. Right from the school level, the dropout rate is higher for girls than for boys. Even at the professional spheres, women seem to miss out in science and technology, particularly so in physical science, agriculture and engineering fields. Even those who have opted for such courses, end up losing good challenging technical jobs.

### **Globalization**

Globalization has presented new challenges for realizing the goal of women's equality. Globalization has initiated a process of change in the realm of economics and politics; in which freedom of economic forces and market forces are of more importance. Globalization insists that unfair competition could be avoided by increasing security of employment, maximum wages and labour rights for women.

### **Holistic Approach to Empowerment**

It is observed from the above data that women enrollment has increased over the years, but it is also noticed that women opt for more feminine courses like arts and humanities. The choices of studies are not directly related, nor are they dependent on women's academic achievement. Nevertheless, in spite of gender disparity, the performance

of girls is much better than that of boys in school or college examinations. The Indian constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Duties and Directive Principles puts a great emphasis on gender equality. The constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

### **National Policy for the Empowerment of Women**

The National Policy on Education, 1986, states that education will be used as a driving force of basic change in the status of women in society.<sup>6</sup> To remove all kinds of disparity among women, various plans and programmes have been formulated for the advancement of women in different spheres, within the democratic framework and development policies.

Further, the National Commission of Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India provided for the reservation of seats for women in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities, so as to enable them to take part in decision making processes at the local level. It is also noticed that India has been influenced by various international and Human Rights bodies to secure the rights of women and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against them (CEDAW) 1993.

The goal of the policy is to bring about advancement and empowerment of women by –

- Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies.
- The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom of women on equal basis with men in all spheres-political, economic, social, cultural and civil.
- Equal access to participation and decision making.
- Equal access for women to health care, quality education, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office *etc.*

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5. [wed.nic.in/empwomen.htm](http://wed.nic.in/empwomen.htm)

6. opcit – Wizarat Kausar



- Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- Changing social attitudes and community practices by active participation.
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- Elimination of discrimination of all forms of violence against women.
- Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organization.

### **Economic Factors**

Economic reliance and autonomy is considered an important ingredient for employment. The United Nations has considered women's autonomy as a basic human right. In India, the majority of the population falling below the poverty line comprise of women. Therefore, the government has introduced various macro economic policies and poverty eradication programmes which specifically address the needs and problems of such women. There are improved implementations of programmes which are very much women-oriented. Steps have been taken for the mobilization of poor women and convergence of services, by offering them a range of economic and social options along with necessary support measures to enhance their capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

### **Micro Credit**

Micro credit mechanisms and microfinance institutions are encouraged so that the outreach of credit is enhanced. Besides, it has been ensured that women falling below the poverty line have access to credit systems like banks and other financial organizations. As such, the economic condition of women will be improved, thereby contributing to socio economic development, both as producers and consumers.

In addition to these, the other areas which need to be addressed for women's upliftment are as follows:-

- a. Nutrition – special attention should be paid to meet the nutritional needs of women at all stages.

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7. [Wcd.nic.in/emppwomen.htm](http://Wcd.nic.in/emppwomen.htm).

- b. Drinking water and sanitation – focus should be on providing safe drinking water, sewage disposal, toilet facilities and sanitation within accessible reach of households, especially in the rural areas and urban slums.
- c. Housing and shelter – special consideration should be given to planning of housing policies, colonies, free housing schemes, especially at the rural areas and urban slum areas.
- d. Political participation – women are becoming more aware of participation in politics, hence need to be encouraged.

### **Constitutional Provisions**

There are specific provisions in the Constitution of India designed to secure equality of sexes and non discrimination –

1. Equality before law and equal protection of laws (Article 14).
2. Non discrimination, inter alia, on grounds of sex – specifically in the matter of gaining free access to places of public resort and state having authority to make special provisions for women (Article 15).
3. Equal opportunity in public employment (Article 16).
4. Equal rights for men and women to adequate means of livelihood (Article 39 (a)).
5. State directing its public policy towards securing the health and strength of workers, men and women (Article 39 (e) & (f)).
6. Humane conditions of work and maternity relief for women (Article 42).
7. State endeavouring to establish a uniform civil code (Article 44).
8. Not less than one third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat to be reserved for women, and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat (Article 243 D (3)).
9. Not less than one third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats at each level to be reserved for women (Article 243 D (4)).
10. Not less than one third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every municipality to be reserved for women, and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a municipality (Article 243 T (3)).

11. Reservation of offices of chairpersons in municipalities for the schedule castes, schedule tribes and women in such a manner as a legislative of state may by law provide (Article 242 T (4)).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the above, there are also special laws aimed at the protection of women. These are:

- (i) Marriage Laws, Marriage Act, Dowry Act, Maintenance Act.
- (ii) Property related laws.
- (iii) Work related laws.
- (iv) Health related laws.
- (v) Violence related laws.

### **Future Vision**

Women in India have achieved significantly in the latter half of the century, incidentally after the declaration of the International Year for Women. Marked improvement have been observed in literacy rates, women's access to education, employment, credit, representation, gender sensitization, involvement in policies and Panchayati Raj institutions and partnership in the voluntary sector organizations.

We have honoured women power giving due recognition to those with potential. Honorable Smti. Pratibha Patil as the 30<sup>th</sup> President of the country, Smti. Indira Gandhi as the first woman Prime Minister of India, Mother Teresa, Smti. Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson of the UPA and President Indian National Congress, Smti. Mayawati, the first Dalit woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Smti. Sushma Swaraj leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, singer and Bharat Ratna awardee Smti. Lata Mangeskhar and many others.

The vision of 33% Women Reservation Bill may also be soon implemented, allowing women to be empowered and to reach their full potential, recognized not only at the domestic level but also at international levels.

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8. Kapur Promilla – Empowering the Indian Women – Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting – Government of India. 2001 – Pg.317.

## Conclusion

Therefore, this paper concludes by stating that the importance of women should be emphasized in all aspects, so that Indian women are totally empowered, modernized, developed, educated and employed. Feminist studies should be encouraged so also economic opportunities, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights, education, social empowerment and technological empowerment. An early recognition and removal of barriers in bringing the full potential of women power at the national level will definitely help in transforming India into a developed nation.

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13. Website – [wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm](http://wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm)

# 6

## Gender Discrimination and Women Empowerment

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*Kareem Sohtun*

### **Introduction**

Women constitute roughly half of the world's population. Despite this, they have always enjoyed secondary positions to men. This is the point which comes out clearly not only through our daily experiences, but also in social science literature, journals, magazines and fiction. That is probably why there has been a lot of interest to study women, their ambitions and their upbringing. Some attempts, however, have been made to recognize the position of women (Bano, 2001).

In recent times, the subject has especially become more important because of the growing acknowledgement that women can play an equally important, if not a more important role in social, economic and political fields. In fact, the society's stability can be maintained only if men and women play complementary roles with equally important statuses in their own spheres of activities (Bareh 1967, 339).

The growing awareness of this situation and the need for improving the conditions of women prompted the United Nations to declare 1975 as International Women's Year, and the years 1975-1985 as the UN Decade for women's equality, development and peace. These decisions testify to the general recognition of the position of women.

Empowerment means a drastic, dynamic and democratic change which empowers women to attain economic independence and be

players in the decision making process. Empowerment implies the power and authority vested on women to make free decisions on their own lives. Since the dawn of civilization, human society has been a male dominated one. Males, by sheer force, relegated females to the position of objects.

One way of understanding empowerment of women is by taking into account their level of participation in decision-making activities. The status of women is associated with various positions occupied by women in society, and how they carry out their responsibilities in their roles as daughters, wives, students, mothers, workers and heads of households. Since the efforts triggered by the International Women's Year in 1975, some changes have been initiated, which have relevance for Indian women. Modern India has had a Prime Minister, a number of women ministers and a woman President (Nair and Nayak 2005, 5-17).

The issue of women's empowerment/gender discrimination has increasingly been recognised as an important variable in development discourse, both in the national and international arenas. This is demonstrated by a number of policy declarations and the emergence of 'Women's Empowerment' which set the agenda for the integration of women in the development process.

Women form an important social category. The basis of this category is not simply the biological entity, but also the socio-cultural construct. The concept of women's issues is defined not only in terms of norms, values, beliefs, traditions and customs of society. We cannot simplify women issues as a conflict between men and women. These issues are the outcome of the prevailing social systems which accord to women low positions in society. Women issues are thus perceived to be linked with social issues such as decision making, education, employment problem, discriminations and social justice.

The topic of women and women's gender discrimination/women empowerment is not really unfamiliar to our society. There has been a tremendous effort in recent times, both on the part of governments as well as developmental agencies, to raise the status of women. Women and their issues have been increasingly taking centre stage both in the political arena and at the social level. Empowering of women presupposes a drastic, dynamic and democratic change in the perception of women in our society. Empowerment is a multidimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life.

## **The Problem**

The subject examines key questions on women's discrimination in relation to empowerment. It focuses on changes brought about by the measures initiated for their empowerment. Before we proceed with the analysis on women empowerment, it is important to understand the nature and forms of increasing discriminations against women. We have to view the nature of violence as a maintenance mechanism of a patriarchal society. In a patriarchal society, the roles played by women are generally devalued and are not allocated a high status. In the framework of such a societal organisation, discrimination against women is always rationalised and is motivated to achieve the subordination of women. Discrimination would include exploitation, upholding of an unequal economic and social structure. Discrimination against women has to be understood and analysed in terms of the authority system, symbol structure and various discriminatory practices leading to women's oppression (Yadav and Mishra 2003, 143).

We may thus discuss the various aspects of discrimination against women in society in terms of some important indicators such as: gender role stereotyping and household chores, amniocentesis and sex discrimination, child marriage, dowry, divorce, health discrimination, eve-teasing, educational discrimination, working conditions and political presentation.

## **Gender Role Stereotyping and Household Chores**

The idea of gender role differences is that universally, men appear to exercise far greater influence in decision-making and are far more visible and audible than their wives. At the same time, most of the tasks associated with the home are done by the mother, grandmother and sisters. Women are expected to perform all these tasks as part of their conventional roles and no special merit is awarded to them for these tiring and tiresome jobs. All the tasks performed by women which consume time and energy are not counted as 'work' or employment and there is no payment involved. It is important for us to remember that non-payment should not also mean non-recognition. In western countries, women's groups have been arguing for payment of house work. In India, the question of payment for household jobs has not really been an important demand.

## **Amniocentesis and Sex Discrimination**

Amniocentesis is the process by which the amniotic fluid is extracted from a pregnant woman to determine the health of the foetus or

unborn child. The aim of the test is not to ascertain the sex of the child, though now it is being misused for pre-birth sex determination leading to abortions of female foetuses. Female foeticide is especially common in societies that value sons, a phenomenon not strange to India. The question then arises, why is an unborn baby girl less valued than a male child? Perhaps, we can partly answer this question by stating that the most important factor is the considerations of dowry to be paid. It is also possible that with the rising cost of living and increasing expectations, the small family norm is becoming more popular. In case of accidental pregnancy, abortion following amniocentesis may well be practised, especially if the foetus is that of a female.

### **Dowry, Child marriage, Divorce**

An account of dowry practices before industrialization in Europe was found in the works of Elizabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neuman (Eds.). *Jorbuch der Offetichen Meinung 1947-1955 (Altensbach am Bodenses)*] provided by Nair and Naya in their book *Women's Empowerment in India* (Nair and Nayak 2005). Before industrialization, land was the only source of income; parents therefore exercised greater influence on the selection of a spouse by their children through their control over the inheritance. Girls in Europe at that time had little scope to marry according to their own choice since dowry had to be paid. Rural youth had to obtain their parents' permission to marry if they were not sure of acquiring land through their own efforts. Dowry however, has disappeared from Europe, except among certain higher social strata. (Nair and Nayak 2005, 360-361).

In Indian society, there are prejudices and certain beliefs underlying preferences for child marriage, especially among the rural and backward communities, even before the attainment of puberty. The girl child is regarded as a dependent being. Instead of sending the girl for formal education, she is tutored to handle domestic chores which would be a benefit to her after marriage. It is often observed that the papers contain many reports about dowry deaths due to non-fulfilment of dowry demands. Divorce is common among women who are socially defined as non productive, which is clearly a discrimination against women in a patriarchal and increasingly materialistic culture.

### **Health Discrimination**

A universal phenomenon noticed is that women get low access to



medical care. Early marriages expose women to longer child-bearing period. This means greater health hazards to women and children. Lack of knowledge and improper care during pregnancy lead to higher death rates among young women. In addition, women and girls suffer as a result of food discrimination, due to the assumption that men need more food because they are bread winners. The fact that women may work as hard and earn as much is rarely taken into consideration. Due to the intake of insufficient and non nutritious food, the female is exposed to greater health hazards. For instance, traditionally in India, women eat after men and when there is limited food to be distributed, females automatically get lesser amounts. Compared to the other countries of the world, the neglect of the female child in India starts early in life.

### **Eve Teasing and Sexual Abuse**

Eve teasing has become a day to day phenomenon in society. College and school girls, women at work places, on the roads, trains and buses are teased in broad daylight everywhere. Besides, sexual abuse such as rape and human trafficking are on the rise, placing women at higher risks are to such abuses, thereby creating physical, mental and emotional strain.

### **Educational Discrimination**

Education is the most important instrument for human resource development. Education of women, therefore occupies top priority amongst various measures taken to improve the position of women. However, in a country like India, education is constrained by social economic conditions of the people, their values and culture. Most often, the male child is being sent to school whereas the girl child tends to household chores from a tender age.

### **Working Conditions**

For a majority of women, a job is essential however, in relation to men, women have fewer choices as well as limited chances for occupational mobility. When men and women work in the same occupation, female tasks are often more in quantity and also more time consuming. Again, when both perform identical jobs, the women get paid lesser than men. Many women are working in the unorganised sector comprising of maid servants, women selling food items, women in small scale industries, offices and shops without the protection of labour legislations regarding their wages, hours of work and labour benefits.

## **Problems in Women's Participation in Decision Making**

With regards to decision making, women have very little say in family issues where males dominate the family scenario. Women are not allowed to take part in discussions and are confined to domestic chores only. In addition, political participation is also very limited in which women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions and the political arena is still very small. Those who muster up enough courage and strength to speak receive very little respect and attention. Interestingly, in the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, Khasi women enjoy considerable freedom; and in contradiction to their female counterparts in the country, they occupy a better position. But these women do not usually take part in the *Dorbars* or village councils. However, with the empowerment of women witnessed in recent times, women are participating in the *Dorbars* and a few of them even hold important offices.

## **Strategies for Empowerment of Women**

It is clear from the above analysis that gender discrimination from the womb is well established. Hence, empowerment of women, which is a multi-dimensional process should enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, to have greater ability to plan their lives and free themselves from the shackles imposed on them by social practices, customs and beliefs.

## **Education**

The most noteworthy feature of women's empowerment is education. Through education, women are given equal rights with men in all walks of life. All over the world, the movement for improving women's status has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for social change. The year 2001 was declared as '*Women's Empowerment Year*'. In between, there were the *United Nations Decade for Women* and the *Year of the Girl Child*. This has led to the emergence of many women's organisations having a common goal of empowerment. Empowerment enabled women to be financially independent, developing a consciousness among them to fight for their rights, to demand better health care, to be educated and demolish the walls of inequality.

## **Career Training**

Women are being taught a range of skills to enable them to earn a

living. Vocational training schemes have assisted women. Many production units, training cum production units such as small scale industries – handloom, handicraft or self-employment units have benefited them. Further agro-based units such as dairy, goatery, piggery, sheep breeding and poultry farms have assisted women to develop a sense of self-reliance.

### **Health Programmes**

Programmes for development where the government usually supports voluntary bodies through supplementary nutrition programmes and modern ideas on medical treatment, hygiene and nutrition are designed especially to benefit women of low income group.

### **Counselling**

Family counselling centres provide a wide range of services to benefit women who are victims of violence, exploitation, forced prostitution, rape, dowry and whose conditions have been most adversely affected psychologically.

### **Political Participation**

Reservation of seats for women's participation in the political arena has encouraged women to participate in local self-governments and the Panchayati Raj System to some extent. Women, like their male counterparts can exercise their franchise and also contest elections.

### **Legislations**

To empower women, the UN General Assembly in 1979 adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often described as an international bill of rights for women. The Bill consists of thirty articles that define what constitutes discrimination against women. Further, it also sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination in countries that have ratified to the Convention and are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. A few articles of the preamble maybe listed as follows –

**Part I.** Discrimination (Article 1); Special measures (Article 4); Sex Role Stereotyping and Prejudice (Article 5).

**Part II.** Representation (Article 8).

**Part III.** Education (Article 10); Health (Article 11).

**Part IV.** Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Article 17). (D'Souza 2005, 220-222).

With reference to India, The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1986 protects Women against sexual exploitation for commercial purposes.

In the political sphere, by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act 1993, 30% seats in local government bodies have been reserved for women.

## **Conclusion**

Women face inequality, discrimination and violence everywhere. However, empowerment of women has indeed brought about tremendous changes in their lives. They have access to knowledge and resources and a greater autonomy in decision making. Women have excelled in every part of life due to empowerment. Empowerment strategy is today emerging as a unique response to the challenges of equality, development and peace. Women's positions are being expanded with networking support services – training, employment, management skills, greater visibility and social security; and new innovations are invariably accompanied by fresh challenges. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the emergence of gender as one of the basic issues of human progress. Concern over the status of women has led to the need to capture women's insight to solve their problems at various levels and move towards a new generation of men and women working together.

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# 7

## Women's Education and Gender Sensitization

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*Donna R. Diengdoh*

Women's development plays a pivotal role in the growth and progress of any society in the world. It is a vital component of the growth process in order to raise the level of productivity and break the vicious circle of poverty. Education is regarded as one of the major factors to bring about improvements in the status of women, one that will empower them with knowledge, skills and self confidence which will enable them to become equal partners and beneficiaries in the development process. Educated women are more likely to marry later, have fewer children and greater means to improve their economic livelihood, all of which are connected to bring about improvement in the status of women. The spread of education is therefore, generally associated with the essential traits of today's civilization such as modernization, urbanization, industrialization, communication and commerce.

The word 'education' encompasses characteristics of knowledge, both material as well as spiritual. Mahatma Gandhi stated that, "Education is a means for an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man - body, mind and spirit". This implies that literacy alone is neither the end of education nor even the beginning; it is just one of the means where men and women can become educated. Therefore, to ensure improvements in the status of women and standards of living, it is highly essential that women have access to quality education.

The constitution of India also confers on women, equal rights and opportunities in all fields-political, social, economic and legal. The Government of India has endorsed the same through its Plans, Policies and Programmes launched at different points of time. Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits any discrimination on grounds of sex (Constitution of India, Article 15(1) & (3)). In spite of these constitutional provisions, in practice, women have not been able to take full advantage of their rights and opportunities.

In most Indian families today, girls and boys are being given the same quality of education. This is one of the priceless benefits of education, in which one witnesses a liberation of the mind. In a society bound by prejudices, women have been portrayed only as guardians of their homes, mothers of future generations and beings having no other life other than rearing a family. Against such prejudices, the need is much more felt to liberalize the feminine mind. In today's world, women are increasingly being given the same social and political rights as men. Such rights can be freely exercised and enjoyed only when women are educated. It is clear therefore, that education gives women the potential of economic independence. As such, the number of women opting for a job in order to add to the family income increases by the day. The development of men and women are of equal importance, since the development of any society depends on the harmonious development of all its constituent elements. The emergence of a new race of educated women has challenged not only the narrowness and orthodoxy of society, but also the ubiquitous masculine authority present in it.

With reference to the Khasis in Meghalaya, the spread of education is one of the main factors that has not only influenced the Khasi society, but also brought changes to it. Education of women among the Khasis dates back to 1843, when a missionary by the name of Mrs Lewis started teaching a few young girls how to read and write. The first batch of women graduated around the 1940's. It is because of education that women have been employed in different types of occupations and professions such as, teachers, nurses, doctors, office workers, engineers and so on. According to a research done by S. Datta on a sample of a hundred working women, the reasons given by women for taking up jobs are- economic necessity (40%), ambition (20%), desire to increase earnings (15%), to pass time (5%) and others (5%). The other reasons like, the desire to be away from an unhappy home environment or to

have freedom to socialize with others, and other socio-psychological factors were not reported. The Khasi working women reveal no role conflict as mothers and housekeepers on the one hand and career women on the other, because the Khasi society accepts the idea of women working in a domain outside the home. In fact, Khasi women have even ventured into the four corners of the world to work as professionals in various fields. Women are also active in trade and commerce, from the lowly 'kwai' and tea sellers, to big textile businesses. Of late, the roles and privileges of women in the Khasi society have undergone many changes, be it professionally or domestically.

The status of women in India has been subjected to many changes over the past few millennia. From an equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers; the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices, such as the office of the President, the Prime Minister, the office of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Leader of the Opposition. Interestingly, as of the year 2011, the President of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha have all been women.

### **Gender Sensitization**

The Government of India attaches great importance to those efforts which trigger changes in social attitudes towards women. The Women's Development Division of the National Institute of Public Co-operation and Child Development, New Delhi, organizes training programmes with a focus on gender issues. These training programmes include para-legal training, training of the elected representatives of panchayats, leadership and organizational training, training of voluntary agencies for women's awareness and sensitization programmes, incorporation of gender issues in development programmes *etc.* In addition to this, Women's Studies Centers established in various Institutions and Universities impart training on gender sensitization to different target groups like students, officials, administrators, police personnel, Panchayati Raj functionaries and others.

The programme of Education for the Prevention of Atrocities Against Women was started in 1982. Based upon the recommendations made in the National Perspective Plan (1988) and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001), the proposal for setting up National Resource Centers for women is now at the advanced stage.

The following are some strategies recommended to encourage girls'/ women's education in India:-

- Involving women's groups like DWCRE and Self Help Groups in promoting women's literacy.
- Providing free compulsory education to all girls up to 20 years of age.
- Establishment of more number of Primary schools.
- Bringing out changes in the attitudes of parents, and the society at large.
- Inclusion of Literacy programmes in all governmental schemes.
- Effective implementation of follow-up programmes.
- Removal of gender bias in the school curriculum.
- Establishment of more NFE (Non-Formal Education) schools to enroll girls and women of different age groups.
- Widening the scope of Distance Education Programmes to cover all categories of people, especially rural women.

Education for women is important and attention must be paid especially to the education of the girl-child. The government has taken steps towards the improvement of women's education in the country, but much depends on the citizens to implement the same. In fact, India has many schools and colleges which are dedicated to provide exclusive education to women.

Though, women have already proved their competency by reaching high levels in every field, there still are many people who consider women as those with the lowest potential. Observing, the present scenario of women's education in India, it can be stated that still more needs to be done in this respect, in order to ensure women's progress, development and empowerment.

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## Laws Related to Women and Children

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*Meena Kharkongor*

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution and is expressed in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Such measures are essential for neutralizing the cumulative socio economic, educational and political disadvantages faced by women. The Fundamental Rights, among others, ensures equality before the law and equal protection by the law; prohibits discrimination against any citizens on grounds of religion, race, sex or place of birth; and guarantees equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters relating to employment.

The specific Constitutional Provision for “Women and child” is expressed in Article 15 (3) which states that, “Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any provision for Women and child”. The Article 15 (3), is one of the exceptions to the general rule provided in clauses (1) and (2) of Article 15. Article 15 confirms powers on the State to make special provisions for the woman and child, since both require special treatment on account of their very nature. The physical structure of women and children is the basic reason in this regard. Therefore, Article 15 (3) empowers the State to make Special Provisions for them.

A study of sexual offences in India revealed that, before the

codification of the Hindu Law, polygamy had been in vogue for a long time. The scope of legitimate sex activities have, however, been narrowed down by post-independence legislations especially those on personal laws and acceptance of western culture, customization and attraction, particularly of the youth group towards it, legislations on matters related to marriage, divorce and the immoral traffic of women and children. As such, there has been, in recent times, an enormous increase in sex crimes. Further, due to the impact of western culture, the age-old traditional norms and customs are fast losing their hold on Indian Society. The craze for comforts and luxurious lives has greatly undermined the glory of past traditional culture, seriously jeopardizing the compactness of normal Indian life.

In spite of legal restrictions imposed on illegal sex indulgence, the rate of sex crimes is on the constant rise. This has thrown a great challenge before the Criminal Justice Administration; the Penal provisions for sexual offences are thus contained in different sections of the Indian Penal Code.

The various offences related to women, and their corresponding punishments are provided under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 as follows:

1. Rape (Section 375 IPC).
2. Adultery and Bigamy (Section 497, 493, 494 & 495 IPC).
3. Kidnapping and Abduction (Section 363, 364, 365, 366, 366A, 366B, IPC).
4. Outraging Modesty (Section 354 IPC).
5. Dowry (Section 498 A IPC).

A brief discussion on these offences is given below:

**Rape:** Section 375 IPC defines Rape as the act of physically forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse that is “forced upon”, and which is-

- Against her will.
- Without her consent.
- With her consent, when it has been obtained under the threat of getting hurt or even death, either to the woman concerned or to any persons who matter to her.
- With her consent, when the man knows that he is not her

husband, and that her consent is given because she believes that he is another man to whom she is or believes to be lawfully married.

- With her consent, when, it was given by reason of unsoundness of mind or intoxication administered by him or through another, so that she is unable to understand the nature and consequence of that to which she has given her consent.
- With or without her consent, when she is under sixteen years of age.

The punishment for rape is imprisonment which shall not be less than seven years but which may be for life or for a term that may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to a fine.

It should also be noted that medical evidence is very crucial in successfully establishing a case of rape. Victims should immediately get themselves medically examined after the commission of rape, since the Medical Report is taken as a corroborating factor to prove the guilt of the accused.

However, victims may be faced with yet another problem which is regarding the refusal of government doctors to conduct the medical examination unless referred to by the Police. To illustrate this, a case in the State of Andhra Pradesh was recorded: *State of Andhra Pradesh versus Manjare*, 2000 SC 2854. With regards to this, there was a refusal by government hospital doctors to conduct a medical examination of rape unless referred to by the Police. Such incidents are unfortunate and are held to be improper, as the absence of vital evidences could hamper the course of justice.

**Adultery and Bigamy:** Section 493, IPC deals with this offense. Adultery and Bigamy refers to the cohabitation caused by a man who deceitfully induces a belief of a lawful marriage.

The constituent offences under Section 493 are as follows:

- That there has been a deceit on the part of the accused;
- That such deceit induced the prosecutrix to believe that she was lawfully married to him;
- That there was cohabitation or sexual intercourse between the accused and the prosecutrix.

To prove the deception, it must be conclusively established that the accused either dishonestly or fraudulently concealed certain facts, or

made a false statement knowing it to be false. Further, Section 497 IPC speaks on Adultery and the punishment prescribed is Imprisonment for 5 years, or a fine or both.

**Kidnapping:** Section 363 A relates to kidnapping or obtaining the custody of a minor in order that such a minor may be employed or used for the purpose of begging. The punishment prescribed for this offense is an imprisonment for a period of 10 years and a fine.

Section 366 IPC, deals with the kidnapping or abducting of a woman in order to compel her into marriage or to cause her defilement, etc. This carries a punishment of an imprisonment for 10 years and a fine. The offense of procreation of a minor girl, referred to in Section 366 A and the offense of importation of a girl from a foreign country, as dealt with in Section 366 B, also carry with them the same punishment of 10 years imprisonment and a fine.

**Outraging Modesty:** Section 354: Under this Section, assault or use of criminal force on a woman with the intent to outrage her modesty carries with it a punishment of imprisonment for 7 years and a fine.

**Cruelty by Husband or relatives of Husband:** Section 498 A: Punishment prescribed for this offense is 3 years imprisonment and a fine.

**Dowry Death:** For such cases, Section 498 A IPC, prescribes a punishment of imprisonment for not less than 7 years but which may extend to imprisonment for life.

Besides these Penal Provisions of the Indian Penal Code, with the passage of time and the increase in the number of crimes against women, the need was felt for more women-friendly laws, which would more specifically address the burning problems that women and children face every day. After much deliberation, our Legislatures passed some important Laws which would meet the pressing needs of women without waiting for the lengthy process and procedures as laid down in the Penal Provisions. Some of these important laws which specifically deal with various offences and the corresponding reliefs are briefly discussed below:

### **Law of Maintenance**

Chapter IX of the Code of Criminal Procedure deals with Maintenance of Wives, Children and Parents. The object of the proceedings under Section 125 Cr .P. C is to secure Maintenance speedily. To ensure this, the machinery is provided for in Chapter IX. By

maintaining those who are unable to maintain themselves, this proceeding seeks to prevent vagrancy in the society.

Such orders for maintenance of wives, children and parents are laid down in Section 125 Cr.PC. This section is a measure of Social Justice, enacted to protect derelict women and children and falls within the Constitutional sweep of Article 15 (3) reinforced by Article 39.

### **Domestic Violence Act, 2005**

The protection of women from domestic violence is the need of the hour in our society. The Indian Parliament in the fifty sixth year of the Indian Republic enacted the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. This Act provides and guarantees a constitutional and therefore more effective protection to women who are victims of any kinds of violence occurring within the family.

Violence shall include (a) Physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal and emotional abuse which includes insults, ridicule, humiliation, name-calling especially with regards to not having a child or a male child and repeated threats to cause physical pain to any person in whom the aggrieved person is interested. (b) Economic abuse includes deprivation of all or any economic or financial resources, as in not providing money, food, clothing, medicines etc.

Those seeking protection under the Domestic Violence Act should bear in mind that information must be given to the concerned Protection Officer or Service-Provider or a Magistrate. The Magistrate, on receipt of the information, shall inform the aggrieved person of her right to make an application for obtaining relief by way of any of the following:- Protection Order, Order for Monetary Relief, Custody Order, Residence Order, Compensation Order or more than such Orders under this Act.

Further, shelter homes are also provided to an aggrieved person and the Medical facility shall provide medical aid in case a request is made from the Protection Officer or the Service-Provider.

### **Procedures for Obtaining Orders of Relief**

An application is presented to the Magistrate or the Protection Officer by the aggrieved person. Such reliefs may include relief for the issuance of an Order for payment of Compensation regarding the damages and injuries caused by the acts of domestic violence. The Magistrate shall fix the first date of hearing, which shall not ordinarily be

beyond three days from the date of receipt of the application by the court. The court shall endeavour to dispose of every application made within a period of sixty days from the date of its first hearing.

The Penalty for breach of Protection Order by the Respondent, or of an Interim Protection Order, shall be an Offence under this Act, and shall be punishable with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to one year, or a fine which may extend to twenty thousand rupees, or with both.

### **Maternity Benefit Act, 1961**

This is an Act to regulate the employment of women in certain establishments for certain periods before and after child-birth, and to provide for maternity benefits and certain other benefits.

This Act applies to establishments like factories, mines or plantations including any such establishments belonging to the government etc. Penalties for contravention of the Act by the employers are also made punishable under this Act.

### **Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956**

The Parliament enacted the **Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956**, which prescribed punishment for those keeping brothels or allowing premises to be used as brothels. A first conviction is punishable with rigorous imprisonment for a term of not less than one year and not more than three years, along with a fine of upto two thousand rupees. In the event of a second or subsequent conviction, the punishment prescribed is rigorous imprisonment for a term of not less than two years but not more than five years and a fine upto two thousand rupees.

For procuring, inducing or taking persons for prostitution, the punishment is rigorous imprisonment of not less than three years and not more than seven years along with a fine. If it is committed against the will of any person, the seven years shall be extended to fourteen years. If the victim is a child or a minor, the punishment shall be rigorous imprisonment of not less than seven years but may be extended to life imprisonment.

### **Sexual Harassment of working women**

The Supreme Court has laid down exhaustive guidelines to prevent sexual harassment of working women after the landmark judgment of Vishaka versus the state of Rajasthan. The court held that it was the duty

of the employer or other responsible persons to prevent sexual harassment of working women. In this case, the Court laid down the following guidelines:

- All employers should take appropriate steps to prevent sexual harassment.
- The Rules or Regulations of Government and Public Sector bodies relating to conduct and discipline should also include Rules prohibiting sexual harassment.
- Appropriate working conditions should be mentioned with respect to work, leisure, health and hygiene in order to ensure that there is no hostile environment towards women at the working place.

Thus, to conclude, such are some of the legal provisions to which women can seek redress in the court of law. Offenses and crimes against women may have increased in the recent past, and the need of the hour is for women to be more aware of their rights as independent Indian citizens.



# 9

## Development of Alternatives: Marginalised Voices Open Up New Historical Archives

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*Shruti Pandey*

Post Colonial theory is concerned with the process of decolonization and the emergence of new nations and communities. Feminism, one of the dominant discourses in the post-colonial space, has coincided with the emergence of the post-colonial theory. It has engaged in questioning and reconstructing many of the concepts and notions of this age. Foremost among them is the question of the marginalized woman; the 'other' or 'doubly colonized', as she is referred to. Because of their marginalization within their own society, women's experiences are always at the risk of being forced into silence. Works of women writers and their attempts at documenting these experiences of women were undervalued, mainly due to the assumptions and prejudices about their literary pursuits. Feminist critics thus played a crucial role in such works being taken seriously. In this context it may also be of relevance to point out another level of discrimination faced by women writers writing "Bhasha Literature".

In any discourse on Post-Colonial writers of the Indian Subcontinent, the writers included have been those writing in English. In this way, a substantial part of Indian writing in regional languages remains unnoticed, inaccessible and little known. Consequently, the regional writer in India remained largely invisible. They are thus confined, and their roles in national literature became limited.

However, although the empire is writing back in the language of its former colonizers, a large number of writers from post-colonial nations prefer to write in their own national or regional languages. 'Post-Colonial translation' of what has gained currency as 'Bhasha Literature' is entering the post-colonial agenda. Of late, there has been a remarkable increase of interest in works done in Indian languages, because of a greater recognition and acceptance of multiculturalism. In the light of this development, it would be relevant to examine the circumstances in which women's writing in Hindi evolved.

The shaping up of the image of the new woman had actually begun in the nineteenth century, when the socio-cultural movements initiated the process of challenging the existing social fabric of the country. The representation of the protesting and awakened woman appeared in Indian literature by the mid-twentieth century. The freedom struggle expanded the space for women by opening new avenues for her. Writers like Mahadevi Verma took a firm stand in the emancipation of women. Women's writings in the post-colonial period can be understood in the light of the upheaval and turbulences of the decades before independence, as well as from the writings of pioneers like Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Pritam. The image of 'the' traditional woman went through a significant change which resulted in the emergence of women like Sarojini Naidu. Attempts were made to reconstruct history and national culture by writers like Subhadra Kumari Chauhan and others.

In the period after independence, the euphoria generated by freedom and the end of imperialism soon gave way to disillusionment. With the hopes and aspirations of people beginning to collapse, there was widespread despair and dissatisfaction. This period witnessed the growth of a large number of women writers in Hindi, whose writings reflected the upheaval of a society marked by a crisis of identity as well as a value shift. Women's movement was part of the social activism that emerged around the early seventies. Women organized and took part in several movements during this period. The sixties and seventies had women's writing reflecting the anti-establishment protest. Mannu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj* (1929), depicting the erosion of values in public life, is a case in point.

After the seventies, there has been a proliferation of women writers in Hindi. Writers like Meherunnisa Parvez, Nasira Sharma, Mamta Kalia, Suryabala, Alka Saraogi, Prabha Khetan, etc. have portrayed the social

conflicts, the dehumanization and violence, the loneliness and alienation of modern man, the complexities of human behavior and the degradation of human life in a consumerist system.

Many of the women writers today, represent the exploited Indian Subaltern Woman. Their characters voice the suppressed subaltern women of the third world. The writings of Maitreyi Pushpa, Chitra Mudgal, *etc* are to be remembered in this context. Can the subaltern speak? This question can be asked in the context of Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaaq* or *Alma Kabutari* or Chitra Mudgal's *Aawan*, and their discourse of the Indian subaltern woman. These writers have placed the feminist discourse in the context of the Indian situation. As Gayatri Spivak has suggested, feminism must be related to the third world, so that it is not merely a slogan for the erstwhile colonized women. Contemporary Hindi female writers have felt the need to evolve their own home-grown feminism. Thus, their feminist attempts have moved towards greater pluralism.

It would not be out of place to point out that these are written by women writers but are not necessarily about women. These novels have been woven around contemporary experiences of these writers. Most of these women have not necessarily written formulaic writing about women, about the enclosed domestic space and their experiences within that space. Mannu Bhandari's, '*Mahabhoj*' and Alka Saraoji's, *Kalikatha Via By Pass* are a case in point.

Several women have asserted that they resent being ghettoized as a feminist writer. They resist being constrained by the label of feminism and being classified thus. In fact, women's movement is becoming obsolete in the wake of a fast changing global scenario. Jasbir Jain maintains, "Post feminism has arrived, feminism is passé." In the post-feminism scenario, we have to develop a perspective that is more inclusive.

Looking at the works of women novelists in the post colonial period, the first name that attracts serious literary attention is that of Krishna Sobti. Sobti represents the spirited women writer who questioned social restrictions and began to assert her individuality in a male-centered world. Her writing is celebrated for its rebel spirit, defiance of social conventions and commitment to freedom.

Sobti's writings portray women who acknowledge and articulate their desires and independence, and are responsible for their own lives. Her iconoclastic wit and sensuous imagery outraged the traditional

orthodoxy of her times. She exposes the hypocrisy and sham of a society that marginalizes and victimizes women who dare to defy the established social set-up.

Her debut novel, *Daar Se bichhudi* (The Homecoming), is the story of a woman who suffers for daring to cross over the boundaries of patriarchal values. Pasho's childhood is marked by a restrictive environment. The suffocating restrictions are apparent in the comments of her relatives as well as her being locked up in a dark room as punishment. Her zest for life motivates her to run away from home. Her transition from 'Badwali Haveli' to 'Khojan Ki Haveli' is symbolic and has significant cultural connotations.

Cut across cultures and time, the story of Pasho is the story of every woman who was a victim of the brutal savagery in the aftermath of the partition. The humiliation that she has to go through makes her conscious of her mistake in crossing the threshold, symbolically and actually. The stark realism of the novel makes it gripping.

Sobti's next novel was *Mitro Marjani* (Damn You Mitro), 1966, which created waves in the Hindi literary world. The novel was written in the sixties when feminism was yet to emerge as a dominant discourse, yet, the protagonist is remarkably bold in the context of her time. A much celebrated character, Mitro is a river-in-spate that threatens to submerge the socially approved notions of morality. A woman brimming over with life, she not only boldly articulates her desire, tabooed by tradition, but also revels in flaunting her sensuality with unapologetic boldness.

Sobti's *Surajmukhi andhere ke* (Sunflower of the Dark), 1972, is another aspect of the problematization of the woman question. The novel shocked middle class sensibility in portraying the ordeal of a woman who is scarred psychologically. Ratti's trauma begins when she is raped in her childhood. Her psyche is traumatized by the brutal incident. The society is insensitive to her agony, and on being branded as a bad girl, she uses aggression as a defense tool. Her inability to forget her traumatic past culminates in self-hatred. She thinks of herself as a girl who never was a girl, a woman who could never be a woman. She leads a deviant, rootless and wandering life and is an intensely lonely person. She does not share her emotional turmoil with anyone and this makes her reflective. She has a deep desire to realize herself as a woman in the company of someone who does not reduce her to a biological being, but accepts her as a person with a traumatic past. In *Ai Ladki* (Listen Girl),

1991, Sobti explores the generational mother-daughter relationship in the backdrop of tradition and modernity. It is a dialogue between a dying mother and her single daughter. Ammu is one of the most memorable characters in Hindi fiction. She is realistic, strong and yet sensitive. She explores the experiences of women in their roles as wives and mothers. At the same time she is aware of the narrow limits of domesticity and can relate to her daughter's choice of a life beyond domesticity and seeking fulfillment as an individual.

*Dilodanish*, 1993, is set in the Delhi of the early twentieth century depicting the lavish lifestyle of the Zamindars and the predicament of the women trapped in a feudal world.

Mridula Garg's arrival on the Hindi literary scene was a landmark in several ways. She stood apart, not only for her strong women-centric narratives but also for the treatment of bold themes hitherto considered taboo. Garg documents the voice of the contemporary Indian woman, the significance of her individuality and the conflict between the individual and the society. A sense of alienation dominates the novels and her protagonists have an air of melancholy. There is a characteristic reflective tone in her writing. The intellectual tone of the narrative is complemented by the lyricism of the style.

In her first novel *Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop* (Her Share of Sunshine), 1975, Garg has brought out the repressive side of marriage, through the central character Manisha; who is trapped in a dull and cheerless marriage and who craves for fulfillment beyond the conventional framework of domesticity. Garg's novel *Chitcobra*, 1979, raised a storm and the literary merit of the novel could not be judged properly because of the controversy surrounding it. The radical stance of the iconoclastic protagonist of *Chitcobra*, outraged the prudish middle class sensibility of traditionalists. Manu, the protagonist lives life on her own terms. She is married and is a mother of two. Bugged down by the boredom of a secure married life, she yearns to reach out beyond the confinements of home. She longs to tread new ground, to venture out into an alternative space. There is an individualistic undercurrent in *Chitcobra* that examines the suffering within the institution of marriage itself, for it denies the individuals their freedom. The search of self is symbolic of the existential alienation. *Main aur Main*, 1984, brings forth the contradictions of the literary world of Delhi where an upcoming woman writer is exploited by an established male writer.

*Kathgulab* (Country of Goodbyes), 1996, acclaimed as a masterpiece, consolidated Garg's position as a writer of extraordinary calibre. The theme of motherhood is central to the novel, which according to Garg, is not an old-fashioned issue, "I've been told that I talk too much about thwarted motherhood in *Kathgulab*. Motherhood is back in fashion in the west, but in India we're still caught up in an aggressive feminist ideology. Why should a woman want to be a mother? Why not? It's a personal choice." This major theme is looked at from different perspectives. The concept of universal sisterhood is reflected as women everywhere have to fight the oppressive social order. In this context, the work transcends cultural barriers and becomes the voice of feminism.

Nasira Sharma has resisted stereotypes, and the entrenched prejudices of tradition in her fiction. She is known for the boldness of her themes and the rebellion of her heroines against conventional morality. In *Shalmali*, 1987, the entrapment of a woman in a cheerless marriage, is the core issue. In *Thikre ki Mangni*, 1989, Sharma has unfolded the prejudices and hardships endured by women in Muslim society.

Manjul Bhagat is a prolific writer who has written about the plight of women in the face of a fast changing social order. Her best known novels include *Ladies Club*, 1976, *Anaro*, 1977 and *Begane ghar mein* (In an alien house), 1978. Her best known novel *Anaro*, is about a woman who works as a domestic help in the middle class families of Delhi. It is the story of a lower middle class woman with an indomitable spirit, who does not lose her self-respect and courage, and does not accept defeat in the face of adverse circumstances.

Moving on to Shivani, yet another woman novelist, one finds that her writings are celebrated for their gentle humanism and finely etched pictures of the inner lives of her women characters. Though her fiction revolves around the woman question, the feminism promoted in her prolific literary output is subtle and gentle. Shivani's women characters function within the existing societal set-up, and gain strength from their experiences. Her novels end on a positive note with the protagonists finding new meanings in their lives.

Mannu Bhandari is one of the most renowned and prolific among the Hindi novelists. The vibrancy of her writing is manifested in the wide range of subjects she has handled, from the domestic to the political. She came to literary limelight with *Apka Bunty* (Your son Bunty), 1971, her narrative of a child's version of marital breakdown and a dysfunctional

family. The novel is a poignant and powerful portrayal of human relationships through the problematisation of the question of marriage, divorce and remarriage. The contradictory traits in the personality of the protagonist Shakun, brings out the conflict between traditional and modern values in the contemporary Indian woman.

Usha Priyamvada's writing addresses the socially binding norms that impact the lives of women and the intrinsic ability of women to deal with them. She also explores the issue of alienation, isolation and displacement, in a cross cultural context ,and the collapse of a traditional support system. Priyamvada's *Pachpan Khambhe Lal Diwaren* (Fifty Five Pillars: Red Walls), 1961, is an insightful work narrating the tragedy of a middle –class woman and her dealings with the hypocrisy of society. The placing of the protagonist Sushma, in the narrative, is significant. She is the eldest daughter of a middle class family who has to look after her mother, sisters, a brother, as well as a paralyzed father. Neil, who enters her life, wants her to join him abroad. Her inner conflict between the culturally conditional image of herself and her own aspirations, has been brought out with understanding.

Priyamvada's *Rukogi Nahin Radhika?* (Won't You Stay Back, Radhika?), 1967, is about the breakdown of a family in the upper middle class society, and the plight of the modern woman wanting to define her individuality. Radhika, the protagonist, has lived a lonely life since her mother's death and finds herself isolated from her environment. She cannot accept the second marriage of her scholarly father and bears a grudge against her stepmother, Vidya . The sense of alienation is all pervading, whether Radhika is in India or abroad. In *Shesh Yatra* (The last journey), Priyamvada narrates the story of a woman and her transformation from the submissive, domesticated wife, to a liberated woman in control of her destiny. Anu's painful marriage, and the subsequent desertion by her husband are incidents that shatter her. She is completely disoriented and inconsolable. As the novel unfolds, she goes through a self-analysis, educates herself to become a doctor, and finds a new identity for herself.

Maitreyi Pushpa, one of the most acclaimed writers of our times, gives expression to the lives and struggles of rural women, who come out of their traditional identities and wage a war against societal prejudices in a closed, custom-ridden set-up. Her protagonists are strong, courageous women who rebel against centuries of oppression and discrimination, a load that they carry within their collective consciousness. Her work is, in

a way, a turning point in the history of women's writing in Hindi, as her women-centric writing is based in a rural milieu. She is the only woman writer in Hindi who has written about the socio-cultural reality of rural India. The regional and local identity finds voice in her writings, where values and structures continue to be feudal, male-centered and exploitative. The concept of feminism receives a specific cultural context in her novels, as her feminism is predominantly indigenous and in this, lies the strength of her writings.

Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaak* (Potters' Wheel), 1997, created a stir because of the way the protagonist Sarang, through her persistent struggles against social injustice, questions the gender equations in the patriarchal set-up of the traditional rural society of Haryana. The genesis of Pushpa's protagonists goes back to her own past, and this gives an autobiographical touch to her narratives. Her characters do not stand only for themselves, but strike at the root of social injustice that lie deep in the system. There is a suppressed rebellion in them that is striving to break free. They transgress their patriarchal boundaries by defying the age old norms, regardless of the consequences.

Chitra Mudgal is one of the most prolific and popular of contemporary writers in Hindi. In *Ek Jamin Apni*, 1990, Mudgal depicts the glamorous and ruthlessly materialistic world of modelling and advertising. In her widely acclaimed novel, *Aawaan* (Furnace), 2000, Mudgal has restructured feminism in specific Indian contexts; in this case the life and times during the trade union movement under the leadership of Datta Samant. But, despite incorporating the undercurrents of labour politics, it is as much a narrative of feminist concerns. In the backdrop of the labour politics, dominating the scene are women characters, their lives and struggles, their joys and sorrows. These characters that surface in the narrative present many dimensions of women's lives.

The subordinate position of women in society and her victimization by a male-oriented system, is the central issue of the concerns of Prabha Khaitan. In her *Ao Pepe Ghar Chalen* (Come Pepe, Let's Go Home), 1990, life in America is seen through the vision of an Indian writer. In her critically acclaimed novel, *Chinnamasta*, 1993, the protagonist Priya is an ultra feminist who is explicitly committed to feminism. A victim of incestuous rape in her childhood, she evolves into a defiant, independent and radical woman who is full of angst against male tyranny and rebels



against her egoist, dominating husband, Narendra. She criticizes the passive submission of women, reorganizes her life and, leaving the domestic space behind, becomes a successful businesswoman.

To sum up, post-colonial women novelists in Hindi now have a presence and visibility beyond their immediate location, constituting a significant space in the contemporary writing in Hindi. Novels by women novelists continue to proliferate and are well received. Moving from the pre-colonial times to the era of social reforms, the articulation of the gender issue during the freedom struggle to the post-colonial age of questioning and restructuring of the social order, the dimension of women novelists in Hindi has been diverse and varied. The writers might have been bound by various factors, including their class and social background. For instance, implicit within the middle class woman writer's articulation of women's concerns, might be the 'othering' of the underprivileged class.

But despite the diverse nature of their writings, there is a remarkable coherence in these writers as reflected in the recurring images of resilient, defiant and strong women characters. This could be explained in terms of the desire to free themselves from patriarchal dominance. In presenting alternative images of women, they have taken up the challenge of transgressing the image of the eternally feminine, sacrificing, submissive woman.

Elaine Showalter has pointed out three major phases common to all literary subcultures. First, a phase of imitation, second, a one of protest and third, a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, a search for identity." (Quoted on pg .21, Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha: *Women writing in India*). The women novelists in Hindi, with all their versatility have been moving to a dimension where this quest for identity has become central to their consciousness, and the evolution of their fiction, charts their struggle for self discovery.

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# 10

## Edward Said and Postcolonial Feminism

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*Dhira Bhowmick*

Complex affiliations bind texts to the world and one has to maintain greater objectivity from the 'hegemonic perspectives' to arrive at the truth-truth that is location and culture specific.

The assassination bid on Malala Yousufzai, the fourteen year old women's rights activist from Swat district of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province is a case in point. While the rest of the world saw it as yet another instance of crime against women, the incident raised few issues and concerns—firstly, how safe is a woman with a 'voice' in the third world and whether western feminist theories can describe the extremes of her unique situation. Secondly, can it describe all the negations and denials that she is made to go through simply because she is a woman?

The incident also brings me to the subject matter of this analysis where I have tried to establish links between Edward Said's 'Travelling Theory' and Postcolonial feminism. Ideas and theories travel from place to place, get appropriated and become part of the adopting culture. This is how civilizational process is nourished, enriched and cultural and intellectual life sustained. It is important to identify and specify the kind of movements that are possible, in order to ask whether, by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another, an idea or theory gains or losses in strength

and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation.

Said therefore insists on a 'conscious' dismantling of colonial hierarchies and structures, which again needs to be matched by a reformed and imaginative re-conception of the colonized society and culture. Said's intervention urges all postcolonial theorists to reconsider all those liberationist activities in the colonized world, including the feminist movement that questions the triumphant and complacent western feminist rhetoric.

The fact is that historical circumstances condition the translatability of some of the feminist ideas, because theories in themselves do not embody incontrovertible values that transcend human exigencies. These theories may resist or question some systems like patriarchy, gender and racial bias, but their application often do not reflect on the ground realities of a particular situation.

Although, both feminist and postcolonial theory attempt to study and defend the marginalized 'other', and both have tried to invert the prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, refuting the binary oppositions on which patriarchal/colonial theory constructs itself, of late it has been realized that there is a lot of discordance between race and gender within colonized cultures. Therefore, it becomes important to acknowledge that identity is not a matter of gender alone. What has come to the fore are limitations and exclusions in each theory and as Leela Gandhi says, there are three areas of controversy which threaten the potential unity between post-colonialism and western feminism:

- i. The debate surrounding the figure of the third world woman;
- ii. The problematic history of the feminist as imperialist;
- iii. And finally, the colonialist deployment of feminist criteria to bolster the appeal of the civilizing mission;

Any intellectual or political construction of third world feminisms therefore, needs to take into account two simultaneous projects-the internal critique of hegemonic western feminisms and formulation of autonomous (geographically, historically and culturally grounded) feminist concerns. While the former needs to be deconstructed, the latter is a matter of reconstruction. Without risking 'ghettoisation', what is to be attempted is creating some kind of synergy between the two.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty says in 'Under Western Eyes Feminist

Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', that 'colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called 'the third world'.

Colonization almost inevitably, implies a relation of structural domination and suppression-often violent of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question. Thus, in the construction of the category called 'third world woman', the material and historical differences are not taken into account and the composite 'othering' of the same becomes a self consolidating project for western feminism. Mohanty also talks about 'double colonization' while referring to the political immaturity of women in a third world country and their more progressive western sisters. These theories draw upon Said's understanding of colonial discourse as the cultural privilege of representing the subjugated other, which again involves the appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge about women through analytic categories. The primary point of reference in such cases is feminist interests which have been articulated in the US and Western Europe (Mohanty, 1994).

While conceding to the fact of limitations in western theories, one must also admit that Indian feminists like Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak and others have tried to reinvest the figure in question with the very iconicity they set out to contest and reject. They have been made bearers of experiences which are in excess of western analytic categories. While their focuses have essentially been on the experiences of upper middle class women, women from the lower middle class have virtually been left out.

While western feminism can be criticised on two grounds- for theoretical articulation of the third world woman and for occluding the historical claims of this figure, the liberal academic feminism can be said to be guilty of silencing the 'native' woman.

While speaking about this complex relationship between post-colonialism and feminist theories, Jenny Sharpe has also questioned the role of the female imperialist, about women's role in the practice of empire (*Allegories of Empire*, 1993). Leela Gandhi on the other hand, has talked about the European Civil Society remaining undecided about women possessing the attributes and capacities of individuals, its colonial counterparts in places like India. *The fact of the female imperialist further*

fractures what can be called, the potential unity between postcolonial and feminist scholarships.

Although Edward Said has not written anything substantial on postcolonial feminism except for mentioning it in passing in his 'Travelling Theory', his essay can be used to relate to the third world feminist situation. In fact, Saidian discourse on the postcolonial, if looked at differently, can be used to show vital links with the feminism that is practiced by the academy. The postcolonial feminist academic discourse by theorists like Mohanty, Spivak and others situated at the metropolitan universities, and like Said occupying the "in between space", has not been transparent to the typical local situations.

It is in this context that I connect Saidian insights to the situation at hand. I shall allude to the three concepts of Said - "worldliness", "affiliative/filiative" and "critical consciousness". "Worldliness" is a very deep and large concept with Said. According to him, literary texts are worldly. The critic can reveal its "worldliness" by bringing it to a particular 'presence'. The particularity of the 'presence' is all important.

The sad incident of the assassination bid on the Pakistani child has its worldliness, third world worldliness. One can call it tradition, or an aberration; it is there as a 'presence'.

What do we do with such a text? Do we accept it and forget it as "worldliness" of situations, events as the flow of life, or interrogate its specificity and contingency. Said situates the Foucauldian concept of the 'contingent' not as an index but as an event. An event is more real and we live by/with it because of its occurrence or re-occurrence. The contingent has to be delinked from a general assumption and must be interrogated as to what it means and does to the "affiliative/filiative" links. Malala Yousafzai's position reflects on the position of the third world women-women minus power, choice and freedom.

What is clinical for feminism therefore, is a "critical consciousness". Critical consciousness for Said is not the insight of a critic about a text, but is an integral aspect of holding the world and the text together in an uneven world. The regime of theory including western feminism contributes towards furthering the unevenness amongst women of the first and the third world countries. So we may think of extending and implementing the Saidian concept of "critical consciousness" in order to develop our own feminist theories-theories that are reflective upon our own situation rather than using western theories to tell 'our truth'.

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## North East's Tribal Women Poets Writing in English: Perspectives by and About Women

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*Indasien. S Warjri*

North East India may appear as a cluster of seven states, far removed from mainland India. Only a narrow stretch of land links West Bengal and the gateway to the North East, which is Assam. This is how the region is reflected in Geography. However, the North East is certainly not a homogeneous whole. Rather, it is an extremely varied place, from hills to plains, the people, religion, culture, customs and language all differ from each state and each region to the other. Yet, interestingly, everyone here is clubbed together as the North East people. A common strain that runs through these states is, however, a strong sense of identity, a well defined and distinct 'self' (Ethnic Life Worlds in North East India An Analysis. Sage Publications, 2008,) that strives for preservation. It can be conjectured here that the need to maintain exclusivity of identity results from a consciousness of being just a fraction of the Indian population. This is especially felt among the tribal communities of the region who therefore try to assert themselves; an assertion made more emphatic due to this "fear of small numbers."<sup>1</sup>

Years ago, referring to the people of erstwhile NEFA, Verrier Elwin stated that "many tribal people have a deep vein of poetic imagination, and only the difficulty of interpretation prevents us from enjoying it as we should."<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, a different picture is visible now, as far as literature



is concerned; for out of this corner of India, emerged the tribal women poets writing in English; strong independent literati telling stories of their land, their myths, voicing the experiences of women through time, aptly using a medium that would be understood by millions.

A fascinating aspect of a woman's journey through life, - from birth, adolescence and through marriage, is related in the Naga poet, Temsula Ao's poem entitled 'The Creator'. Ao's depiction of a girl child being conceived "in another woman's body", is a strange way of describing one's mother. Further, since the Ao society of Nagaland is patriarchal in nature<sup>3</sup>, it is therefore understood that the woman in the poem is said to be born into a 'man's world'. In fact, the poet talks about two kinds of worlds in the poem, two kinds of sensitivities - one belonging to men and the other to women. Nature teaches us that the battle between the sexes is an integral part of life. Therefore, even at the moment of birth itself, the woman learns not only to "breathe" but also to "fight". This fight continues through adolescence and in an attempt to survive this strange environment, the woman deftly acquires skills, and with newfound confidence, charms man into 'her' world. She enters the "domestic web" of marriage only to realise that once again, she is trapped in a situation where man reigns supreme; the man - woman collision continues. Consequently, gender roles assigned according to the standards of culture take over and the woman only discovers that, her role is to serve, to lose her identity, and to be known only as somebody's wife. Sadly, she is transformed into a nameless entity. Sex roles ought to be played and therefore, she ought to reflect only the glory of her man. She is one of those who have been oppressed by gender.

However Ao's 'woman' would not be condemned to a nameless existence forever. Balance of power is restored when she realizes the potential within; she is a progenitor and therefore, 'creator' as the title of the poem suggests. The real woman buried all along can now resurface to bravely face the world.

"Just One More Field My Child" is a poem by the Meghalaya poet Ester Syiem, with allusions to a woman, one desperate enough to wrestle with life's battles and fulfill her role as 'mother'. In the poem, the poet captures the terror of a scene where a face of rock opens up to swallow a helpless child, while its mother is busy tilling and ploughing the field. Selfless and committed to a cause, that of earning a meal for her child, she is, in this regard, a devoted mother, a stereotypical picture of

'good femininity'<sup>5</sup>. Paradoxically, in her loyalty to her commitment, she lingers a little too long at the plough and in spite of her child's cry for help, she plods on, thereby losing her child to the swallowing rock. With fingers roughened and scabbed, this woman is a desperate bread-earner. Reading culture into the poem,- being a matrilineal society, the usual cultural practice amongst the khasis is that the mother or the maternal grandmother gets custody of the children in case of the death or absence of the father, which seems to explain why, in this poem, the child is being cared for by its mother. Against all odds, the woman in this poem has assumed a gender role, that of being the provider for her hungry child. The poem resonates with an atmosphere of pathos and of helplessness brought forth by poverty. Tension is always aggravated by the act of waiting, and in the poem, the same is felt as the child cries out for its mother expectantly waiting for the rescue that never came.

Ester Syiem writes about yet another victimized woman named 'ka Likai' in her poem entitled, 'Noh Ka Likai'. The story of Likai is retrieved from the mythical past where one reads of Likai, a widow with a toddler to care for. Burdened with life's cares, Likai remarries, thinking that it would lighten her load. Little did she know that her second husband would despise her child, thereby adding to her woes. While Likai was away working and carrying iron-ore one day, her husband kills the child and cooks the meat into a fine curry. To add to the horror of the tale, Likai returns from work and was surprised that her husband had come up with such a wonderful meal. Tired and hungry, she eats the curry only to realize a little later that she had eaten her own child. This revelation came to her when she saw the tiny fingers of her child in the betel nut basket. Inconsolable, Likai runs to the edge of a waterfall and plunges herself into the deep. This tale is an etiological story, for, the eternal waters of the waterfall continue to flow to this day at Sohra, and is known as the 'Noh ka Likai Falls', meaning the waterfalls where Likai flung herself.. The sight of 'broken ligaments' followed by a kind of 'nausea' that 'regurgitates' in her throat, reveals the intensity of the moment that can only be matched by a leap off a cliff. Not talking about the crime of the husband which is indeed unpardonable, Likai's fault was her inability to stand tall, to believe in herself, to be a fighter like the woman in Temsula Ao's 'Creator'.

Yet, after such bleak pictures of suffering and victimization, the

women poets of Meghalaya tell their tales of yet another woman who was a mother of kings. Ester Syiem and Indari S Warjri have both written about the ancient mythical woman named Pahsyntiew who "was wooed to procreate a generation of rulers" (Ester Syiem). Pahsyntiew is believed to be the ancestress of the Shillong rulers or 'syiem' as they are called in the local language.

Kings, rulers or dynasties having mythical, heavenly or superhuman origins also prevailed in other ancient cultures of the world. The Pharaoh is said to be the son of a god and he is the living image of this god<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, the ancient Chinese speak of the three sovereigns who were the god - kings responsible for shaping the Chinese culture. Similarly, the rulers of Shillong were the sons of Pahsyntiew, a woman dwelling in the Marai Caves, which is located in the present day East Khasi Hills District, 'south-east of the Shillong Peak'. (The History and Culture of the Khasi People. Guwahati : Spectrum Publications, 1985). Pahsyntiew is revered as an important deity and to this day, propitiations are offered to her at an annual festival held at Smit village during the Nongkrem Dance. In the story, Pahsyntiew was lured out of her cave by a man holding a beautiful flower in his hand. In a bid to take the flower, she sashays towards the mouth of the cave only to be snatched by the man who would take her home and later marry her off to a warrior. Her sons were noble and strong and they were deemed fit as rulers.

In her poem entitled 'Pahsyntiew', Indari.S. Warjri symbolically equates the flower in the man's hand with 'unnamable delight' that Pahsyntiew had never before encountered. The flower lured her from the darkness of ignorance to the light of experience. Like Ao's 'creator', Pahsyntiew becomes the 'giver of life', progenitor, creator of a race of kings, who after all is said and done, returns to the cave, beckoned by the "celestials" (Indari.S. Warjri), never to be seen or heard again. In an attempt to portray the uniqueness of this woman and the nature of her origin, Ester Syiem, in a poem of the same title, writes about two distinct binaries in the poem - your kind" and "their kind".

*Was it a decisive break with their kind,  
or a simple going back to your kind,  
a rejection of their ways,  
or a rejection by them?*

Apparently, the woman of the Marai Caves was not of the same stock as men were and because of this difference, she must return to where she came from. Either she rejected men and the earthly existence, or, she was alienated by men and therefore returned to the security of the cave.

Tribal women poets of the North East have also been influenced by the turbulence that has affected the region. The North Eastern states have, over the years, witnessed violent manifestations of identity, whether socio- cultural or political; people here are no stranger to violence, militancy and conflicts. Assertions and contentions have existed between various groups, either pitted against each other or against the 'outsider', the 'immigrant' and the 'other' (Ethnic Life Worlds in North East India An Analysis. Sage Publications, 2008,). This has oftentimes plunged the various states into periods of conflict. Amidst all this, one hears the voice of vehemence as a woman spews out in Monalisa Changiga's poem -

*Don't waste your time  
laying diktats  
and guidelines  
on how to conduct my life  
.....  
for you do not know  
beyond the AK-47  
But I am more than a machine*

(Of A People Unanswered)

Saturated and fatigued of violence, militancy and the gun culture, Changkiga's woman seems to emerge stronger and more resolute to have a better life sans violence. There also runs a voice of gender protest as we hear her challenging her man about his "diktats". She refuses to be just a 'mass of molecules', for she has a face, an identity, a life to lead in spite of. In another emotionally charged quatrain, the poet questions culturally assigned gender roles and gender hierarchy where a woman's aspirations is reduced to insignificance -

*I see nowhere written  
that your unironed shirts*

*deserve my attention  
more than my flying lessons.*

(I See It Nowhere)

Another poet from the same state Nini Lungalung, paints a poignant picture of a woman living a struggled life amidst seditious surroundings. Unfortunately, this is the kind of existence where a single drop of water cannot be spilled while blood is allowed to saturate the dust to scarlet. Violence has parched the land of that life giving water just as it has sapped its people of fellow feeling and compassion. In solemn gravity, therefore, we read of -

*...a young man gunned down  
As I shopped in the market place.  
Two thick thuds, and then he fell...*

(Dust)

Staring violence in the face, women can only “stumble home” with “furtive footsteps hushed by dust”(Nini Lungalung) or she can, with impetuosity, articulate her frustrations like Changkiga’s woman who reproaches her man for living by the gun. In all this, the woman seems to have an existence that is apart from the violent world of men yet, ironically, not removed from it.

Polarities that exist between men and women are also explored by Mamang Dai. In her poem entitled ‘I Dreamt You Spoke to me Last Night’, the woman persona in the poem is unable to understand her man. The joining hands have utterly failed to bring them to a common level of discernment. She fails to see how her man could be a prey to love’s ‘snatching game’. Thus, she describes him as ‘dark you’; ‘dark’ because of his actions, ‘dark’ also because she can never fathom his innermost thoughts, the latter perhaps, being the greater hiatus between his world and hers.

*Our hands join again  
on that road to the river  
that dark river  
dark huts, dark you,  
and dark women*

.....

*though I have learnt so late  
when life plays the snatching game  
I am fascinated by memory's sting.*

A similar strain is also seen in another poem entitled 'Red Flowers or White'. In this poem, the poet presents man as being non – committal, much to a woman's disappointment. Man's love is fleeting, unstable, undecided and undependable and the ironic ending to the poem only points to the fact that women can only resign to this fact.

*The girl with the long hair  
has lured my love away from me.*

.....  
*Red flowers or white  
Ah! men forget so soon.*

Mamang Dai reaches symbolic heights in her collection entitled 'River Poems'. Pregnant with meaning, these poems are steeped in the backdrop of her pristine land, a 'valley' she describes, where there were 'no strangers', a close knitted community where 'recognition was instant'. This was a land of 'mountains', 'hills', 'orchids' and 'lilies', 'rivers', 'stone', 'bamboo'; of 'pagan hills' and 'frozen villages'. Yet, from this calm and idyllic valley, a woman moves away to newer lands. This is seen in the poem 'Prayer Flags', where the poet refers to a 'lady' beckoned home by her land of snow-covered mountains and Buddhist prayer flags. The lady has perhaps found a life outside, beyond the fringes of her land, and the issue of her return is never resolved through the poem. The waiting for the return continues even as the prayer flags fall to the ground. Contending ideas, of home, love, and security of familiar landscape is juxtaposed with the world that exists outside this gamut.

Thus the poet repeats -

*Come home  
Come home  
Over the snow covered pass  
the prayer flags have fallen.*

North east India is a culturally varied place, and equally varied are the faces of their women. From mythical beings, far removed from reality, as seen in the poets from Meghalaya; to women alive and

breathing in society, active players of creation and living in a social order that is not alien to strife; to a romantic soul from the hills of Arunachal, all this, and more is the domain of the North East tribal women poets writing in English. The literature emanating from these poets provide an insight into the historical and social truths of the region as it appears in a social context; truths related to the extant rich folk history, combined with the insularity and remoteness of the region, with all its unique problems and challenges of contemporary living. It is interesting to note the perspectives of women writing about the 'experiences of women' in this context. These poets have presented an insider's view of the reality of the region, both then and now. These women poets have given a voice to the stories of the region propelling them towards a wider audience. The tribal women poets from the North East have indeed told their stories.

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2. Elwin, Verrier (2009): *The Oxford India Elwin*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p 339.
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# 12

## Telling Ourselves into Being: The Art of the Story

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*Renee Lulam*

*We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated.*

*Paul Ricoeur*

I would like to begin this essay with the question 'Why?' Why do we tell stories? Why and how do narratives shape our existence, our realities? And just how do we women use the narrative in our lives? Before I begin though, this would be an appropriate time to call up a narrative. Stories are coaxed out of the most mundane places and this was given to me by somebody who first heard it narrated over a community radio station, in one of her various travels.

Once upon a time, a young woman lost her husband. He died, leaving his young wife beside herself with grief, unable to come to terms with his death. Then she heard about a shaman - a woman - in a distant village who brought the dead back to life. In hope, she packed her bag and headed to that village to make her appeal to the shaman. At the shaman's house, she was greeted by the sight of the shaman in strange apparel, bits of paper, odds and ends sticking out all over. The shaman instructed her to wait and watch while she went back to calling up life back into the dead. Chanting and dancing, she pulled a piece of paper off

from the dress and chanted from it, pulled off another piece of paper, chanted from it again, and this continued. After a while, the young woman realised that the shaman resurrected the dead through stories told about the dead, so she went back home to write a story about her husband.

Anthropologists will tell us that storytelling is common to every culture. We have a long history of the ways in which we narrate our lives and ourselves to each other, beginning with prehistoric cave paintings, classic mythology texts, all the way down to folklore, and urban legends. In this day of multimedia and hypermedia, narratives have evolved into the printed word, the radio, the television, the internet. Even video games. Channels promise us breaking news twenty four-seven. We live in a relentless pursuit of stories, from the very greeting of 'How are you?', 'How was your day?' or 'Hey, what's up?' That is the same as saying 'Tell me a story', or more particularly, 'Tell me your story'. We invite narratives, tease them out, build bonds in a symbiotic exchange of telling and listening to stories. Margaret Atwood says '...it's right dead, smack in the centre of what it is to be human, the ability to tell a story.'<sup>1</sup> Language is central to human existence. To live in language is to live a particular kind of life. Toni Morrison knows this intimately, and she said 'We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.'<sup>2</sup>

We tell stories to make sense of our world, give meaning to events, and share that understanding. We have learnt to negotiate these exchanges at infancy, and we learn to hone our narratives as we grow older into childhood- 'The dog ate my homework' becomes a more believable 'there was a traffic jam.' We tell stories to escape, to survive. Not everyone paints, not everyone plays a musical instrument or sings, not everyone writes. But everyone lives in some form of language, a narrative. To lay claim on language whether it is in the form of poetry, or art, or music, or dance, or the morning news, or gossip is to lay claim upon a particular kind of meaning-making. Joan Didion says 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live'<sup>3</sup>. It is a universal phenomenon.

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1. Interview with Max Miller, recorded on 21 September 2010. [bigthink.com/users/margaretatwood](http://bigthink.com/users/margaretatwood)
  2. Nobel Lecture, December 2003. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html)
  3. World Science Festival 2012, New York

In parts of the world where violence has fractured everyday life, trauma can render individuals speechless; the traumatic experience of violence can steal the capacity of their words to make sense of the world around them. Violence is not new to this part of the world we live in. In a contested region like ours, it is the narratives, whether as a scarcely coherent plot tentatively strung together by events, that remains yet unuttered, or if it is kitchen gossip making mundane of the brutality around —perpetrated by both state and non-state actors— that allow us to give meaning to our precarious everyday existence. In the narrative of women, what is often passed over, disparaged as gossip has often been the stronghold of meaning-making. Women use the narrative to connect and build relationships and to survive. Nature does not allow us to choose in this, biologically responsible as we are for the survival of the species. This has a rich history. There is the ancient story of the ignoble Sultan who demanded for a virgin night after night to be killed the next morning. Then Sheherzade spins her yarn around the Sultan, postponing her death, and the death of numerous other women.

There is nothing that binds me to writing about the narratives of women of only one community in North East India. I will stay on only one community, however, for three reasons- it does not matter which community a woman is from, she is a woman first, and her story resonates in every other woman. Their narrative dialect is more familiar to me than all other dialects of North East India. And finally, the stories of these women are so rich, so deep, so universal, so easily ignored, and yet so significant - to us as women, and to the story of the human race. In the sixteenth century, John Donne wrote, 'Any man's *death diminishes me*, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know *for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee*'.

In nineteenth century Mizoram, Saikuti, a woman of verse could sing satire that sent all the men in her village community into a fury, endangering her own, and her family's safety. Another verse spoken to appease, delighted the same men enough to risk their lives for her. This was not the first time women of this region used narrative to negotiate and survive. Mizo women have had a long history of narrating themselves into healing and survival. Their narrative is complex, replete in layered metaphor and abiding depth. I have always been reluctant to translate their narratives because a translation cannot capture the completeness of their intricate use of language, their idiom, intensity or

experience. For the purpose of illustration however, I have quite inadequately done so, leaving many significant metaphors, similes and other poetic idioms behind, for want of a substantive parallel.

In the eighteenth century, Lianchhiari, daughter of a village chief, fell in love with a man of low means, a 'commoner'. Caught in the act, as it were, she managed to convince her father to allow them to marry. But then her lover's disloyal emissary lied to him, persuading him to flee to another village to escape the chief's murderous rage. Lianchhiari's narratives speak of regret, of pain, of helplessness and veiled rage at the treachery.

In the old way of life, Mizo chiefs and men of proven valour performed ceremonies and ritual feasts to smoothen their after-life journey into *Pialral*, Paradise. These ceremonies, done in stages and involving vast resources, could only be performed by the wealthy. Each stage honoured the man with greater celebration. It was on such a night of her father's ceremonial feast that Lianchhiari and her lover, Chawngfianga were found in bed. Lianchhiari's remorse at her infamy overshadowing her father's impending glory that never arrived says:

*We exceeded far in love, I confess.  
My father's awaited legend yet uncelebrated. Snuffed out,  
lost forever.*

Her father was magnanimous. He agreed to let Lianchhiari marry her lover, 'commoner' though he was. But duped by his emissary, a jealous relative, Chawngfianga fled the village in the deep of night. Lianchhiari was devastated:

*In quietness you fled, silent unquestioning,  
Had I but known you mayn't have stolen away, love of my  
childhood.*

In the old life, entire days were spent working *jhum* fields. Young men and women partnered to work together on each ones field – *in lawm*. They still do so. Partners *in lawm* could be platonic or romantic. With Lianchhiari, her *lawm-pa* was her lover. And so:

*I wander fields of desolation, my grief brooks no toil  
Your absence with me, I lay beneath the thick of gentle trees.*

The village Chawngfianga moved to, was visible from where Lianchhiari lived in her village uphill. She would helplessly watch as she

saw the young men in that village at play, relaxing, as she imagined Chawngfianga among them, out of her reach.

*The distance below I behold, they sway graceful at play  
We could not be worthy of you, you who are above all charm.*

In those days rice beer, *zu*, was ceremonially offered to visitors in containers where the rice beer was brewed. Two hollow bamboo tubes allowed two people to drink together, foreheads meeting over the pot. This was called *khawnthiang*. *Khawnthiang* was prepared for special guests as a sign of peace and friendship. It was also done at marriage celebrations of chiefs or honoured members of the community.

Years after Lianchhiari marries another, Chawngfianga goes to her village to gather supplies and provisions. That night, Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga stayed up the entire night sharing *khawnthiang*.

*Perhaps to draw us near, we drink at khawnthiang  
Perhaps that we should part, dawn's rooster crows.*

A place called *Lianchhiari Lunglen Tlang*, which translates to Linachhiari's Heartache Ridge, still stands today, and her narrative lives on in Mizo memory and art.

In mid nineteenth century, there was another daughter of a village chief who fell in love with a commoner. Her name was Lalthawngpuii. Better known as Laltheri, of the Sailo clan of rulers. This time, however, Laltheri could not convince her family, though pregnant with her lover Chalthanga's child, to allow them to marry. On her brothers' orders, some male subjects hunted her lover down, lured him into sharing *zu* with them, and slew him from the back. In enraged grief and protest, Laltheri tore off the beads she wore around her neck, her head dress that showed her to be the chief's daughter. She threw down all her finery, and walked about bare bodied naked. Her mother could not persuade her into clothing herself. Laltheri's expression of rage, pain and protest in lyric and song was almost primal.

*I shall not clothe myself soft, ka nu  
There my beloved lies, out beneath the cold earth.*

She refused any food, all the while very aware of her *Sailo* pride. Her mother, in fear that she would waste away would coax her to clothe herself, or even at least eat a meal, but Laltheri remained adamant—

*Hunger shall not find me so easy a victim, ka nu  
As this sorrow so unyielding, a regal Sailo heart could die.*

In those days, it was the practice that in battle, victors would carry back the heads of those defeated as trophies. The heads would then be fixed atop poles or trees outside their homes. Laltheri's anguish spared no propriety for her family. She lashed her anger out on them for having her lover killed comparing it to scalping an enemy.

*My family unwise of heart  
Would you hang the captured head of my love out on our soil.*

Tribes that lived on the hills of east Mizoram, now known as the Pawih tribes, were enemy to the Sailo clan. Over a number of skirmishes, large losses would have incurred for both the Pawih and the Sailo. However, in another invective, Laltheri scorns her family—

*Would you hang the captured head of my love up on a tree  
When valour fails at your enemies of the hills.*

For the longest time, Laltheri refused to clothe herself at all. Naked, she slept in the open, and walked their village, Ruallung, her head wrapped in rags. She roved the length and breadth of Ruallung mourning and in rage, shaking off all attempts made by her mother to clothe or feed her.

*Head covered, I roam the slopes of Ruallung's fringes  
Would it that Chalthanga could wander upon this broad land.*

Of Laltheri's narratives, the most poignant are those about her baby, the child Chalthanga never saw. She would cradle her baby to sleep on the veranda of their house, a heartbroken lullaby that her child would grow up unclaimed, her child's father rejected and murdered for social mores' sake—

*To the north, birds court blossoms in trees  
While Chalthanga dares haunt no more but ten lengths away  
His little babe would he pine to hold.*

Mizo society of the day was extremely patriarchal. It still is. Patrilineal parentage is the stronghold of identity. Children who were denied by their fathers or denied the legitimacy of their patrilineal parentage were considered orphans and kinless. Laltheri, acutely aware of this says:

*A fatherless babe I cradle  
My beloved, helpless slain.*

This narrative of Laltheri's grief and condemnation sent her family into deep remorse. It was decreed that women be granted more freedom of choice, a better standing. Laltheri is remembered for opposing barriers between the classes, taking a strong stand against prevailing class prejudices and honour killing. It was her voice, her protest, her sheer refusal to be subjugated in her life and narrative that began a collapse in class prejudices that swept across Mizo communities in the nineteenth century.

Strung together, these narratives are the stories of extraordinary lives that refused defeat, lives that were told into survival. Their narratives declare- 'I Am!' Psychologist writer and collector of stories, Clarissa Pinkola Estes in her seminal work on the inner lives of women says, "A story is not just a story. In the most innate and proper sense, it is someone's life."<sup>4</sup> Unique to humans and universal across time and cultures, is narrative. And the woman has continually saved herself and her species through the wise use of language, stories told and retold.

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4. *Women who run with the Wolves*, Pg 469-70. Rider Books, 2008

## Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Meghalaya

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*Valentina Pakyntein*

### **Introduction**

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment are two sides of the same coin. Over the last two decades, Gender Equality and Women Empowerment have been recognized as significant yardsticks for socio-economic development of a nation. The role of women's empowerment for a just society was highlighted in the Beijing Conference (1995). This paper aims to appraise Women Empowerment in Meghalaya by critically examining the Gender Equality Index in the state. To enable one to evaluate the relationship between the two concepts, it is necessary to first understand the concept of 'women's empowerment' and 'gender equality' and thereby, examine how these concepts relate to each other in the context of the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, the homeland of the Khasi and Garo people.

To achieve the thrust highlighted above, this paper is divided into four sections. The first section briefly discusses the concepts of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. The following section focuses on Gender Equality Index in Meghalaya based on the Planning Commission Report (2002); National Family Health Survey (2000 and 2009) and the basic Statistics from Meghalaya District Level Statistics (Government of Meghalaya, 2002) and North East Region (Government of India 2006). The third section highlights gender inequalities in the three key areas as



prescribed in the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) index; while the conclusion sums up Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Meghalaya

### **Gender Equality and Women Empowerment**

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment; the aim of the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, was therefore to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women in the social, economic and political spheres.

Empowerment of women refers to the decision-making power of women in the social, economic and political spheres of life; it also refers to increased opportunities, and increased control over their own lives. Empowerment is a process of making women aware of socio-psychological and political injustice that prevails against them in the society. Women empowerment is thus a prerequisite to gender equality and development. The issue of empowerment of women has been much discussed at various levels to find a solution to the age old problems of gender discrimination, exploitation of women and those concerning the upliftment of the status and position of women in society.

In recent years, two indicators have been developed and accepted to assess gender disparities. These are the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), which reflects the Gender Equality Index (GEI), and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) first introduced in the year 1995 and adapted in India in the year 2001.

The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) measures achievements in the same dimensions and uses the same indicators as the HDI, but the average achievement has been adjusted in order to reflect the inequalities between men and women. It measures the overall achievements of women and men in the three dimensions covered by the HDI, which are – Health - Life Expectancy at birth and Infant Mortality Rate; Educational attainment- Adult Literacy Rate and combined gross enrolment ratio; Economic attainment- Estimated Earn Income. (UNDP, 2001).

India used the same methodology for constructing the HDI and GEI. The point of departure lies in expressing the index as a proportion of attainment level for females compared to that of males. Secondly, in estimating the index, the economic attainments for males and females have been captured by taking the respective worker-population ratio, unlike the use of per-capita monthly expenditure as in the HDI. This has been done, primarily, to avoid taking recourse to apportioning consumption or income, between males and females at the household or at an individual level, using criteria that could always be debated. Educational and health attainments have been captured using the same set of indicators as in the case of HDI (Planning Commission, 2002).

**Table 13.1 Indicators considered by the Planning Commission for measuring GEI (and HDI)**

National Human Development Report's variables for GEI (and HDI).	
Health	Life Expectancy at age 1 and Infant Mortality rate
Educational attainment	Literacy Rate 7+ years and Intensity of Formal Education
Economic attainment	Worker-population ratio (GEI) Per capita real consumption expenditure adjusted for inequality (HDI).

Source: Planning Commission (2002)

Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) focus on women's opportunities rather than their capabilities; it captures gender inequality in three key areas:

- Political Participation and decision making power, as measured by women's and men's percentage share of parliamentary seats (as % of total).
- Decision making power, as measured by women's and men's percentage shares of positions as legislators, senior officers and managers, as well as women's and men's percentage share of professional and technical positions (as % of total).
- Power over economic resources as measured by women's and men's estimated earned income (as % of total).

The Gender Empowerment Measure GEM is concerned with the opportunities in the economic and political life of a country that are available to women as compared to men. It measures women's

participatory role in society using as indices women's share of technical, professional and managerial jobs, representation in Parliamentary bodies and share of earned income. While the GDI measures women's attainment of basic capabilities, the GEM measures their success in using the capabilities to play a decision-making role in society.

### **Gender Equality in Matrilineal Society of Meghalaya**

Matrilineal society as widely understood, confers more autonomy on women, when compared to a patrilineal society. Women have the right over their children by dint of the matronymic principle, women own property and thus have control over the resources and capital, or can have access to capital because they are the owners of property. Women can also indirectly participate in the socio-religious and socio-political activities in their social set-up.

However in Khasi-Pnar and Garo societies, as in most matrilineal societies, men to a certain extent, exercise control over their sister's, or niece's family and property. The public domain is directly under men's control; they however succeed to traditional political offices via the female line, *i.e.*, brother to sister's son or sister daughter's son. The traditional political offices of *U Syiem* (Chief) and *Doloiship* (ministers) are occupied by men only, and succession here again is through the female line. In the Khasi states like Nongkrem, women figure as symbolic heads and they are associated with the rituals of the community. The office of the *Syiem-Sad* meaning 'State-priestess' is accorded to the *Syiem's* mother or his eldest sister. The role of the state-priestess is religio-political in nature and she is entrusted with the custody of rites and ceremonies of the state; though actual performance of religious rites and ceremonies are in the hands of males. Thus, in matrilineal societies, males and females have certain rights, privileges and functions, all contributing to the continuity of the society where they perpetuate.

At present, gender roles have been restructured according to the changing times. Most societies all over the world face problems such as school drop-outs, alcoholism, drug-addiction, broken-homes, violence against women and children, poverty and so on. However, there has been a redefinition and a fortifying of rights and privileges of individuals. Tradition continues alongside changes, and the matrilineal societies of Meghalaya, have been able to accommodate such changes occurring in the socio-economic, socio-religious and socio-political arenas.

*Health:* Health is a very important indicator of the well-being of a society and it has immediate implications for productive capabilities and capacities, as well as the quality of life. An assessment of the health status is possible from key indicators such as infant mortality, life expectancy, crude birth and death rates, and nutritional status. Comparative and segregated data on male and female life expectancy, infant mortality, sex ratio at birth *etc.* are tell-tale signs of the degree of gender equity.

The Infant Mortality rate (IMR) in Meghalaya, appears to be better than the national average, with 79 and 80 per thousand while India's average is 115 and 77 per thousand in the year 1981 and 1991 respectively (Planning Commission, 2002). The urban areas in Meghalaya have fared better than the rural areas. It is interesting to note that IMR dramatically declined in 1991 (26 per thousand) in the urban areas, though in the rural areas (86 per thousand), it is slightly higher than the national average (84 per thousand). Data from the National Family Health survey indicate that the situation worsened in the later parts of the 1990s, since in Meghalaya, the IMR stood at 89 per thousand, the lowest in the country (IIPS, 2009:194-195).

The state of women's health and well-being too, left much to be desired. On biological grounds, mortality in infancy should be higher for male infants than female infants, particularly in the first month of life. In 1981, the female IMR (76 per thousand) was better than males' (81 per thousand), but in 1991, the figures stood at -males: 79 per thousand, females: 82 per thousand. When it concerns decision-making about their own health care, women in Meghalaya stood second, next only to Himachal Pradesh. However, the state of women's health in Meghalaya is very poor as revealed by the National Family Health Survey (IIPS, 2000: 252). Women in Meghalaya recorded the highest prevalence of anaemia (63.3%) in comparison to other states in the North-East (except Assam which is higher at 69.7%) or to the national average (51.8%). Their nutritional status as measured by body mass index (BMI) is also much below the national average.

Reproductive health of women in Meghalaya is also very poor in comparison with the national average or other tribal states in North-East. Meghalaya recorded the least in areas of antenatal care, maternal care, deliveries assisted by health professionals (lowest in India) or those with symptoms of reproductive tract infection (RTIs) or other health variables

(IPPS, 2000: 293,305-306 and 313). Meghalaya also tops the list in non-usage of family planning methods. Women in Meghalaya have very little knowledge of contraceptive methods, albeit being exposed to family planning messages better than the average Indian women. Is education (low female literacy rates) responsible for poor health of women in Meghalaya? And if women's education is low, to what extent does it affect the health status of the population in general? 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 the population. Naturally, 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 of significant importance in building a healthy population.

In Meghalaya, there are only 10 government hospitals, 5 of these are located in East Khasi Hills District, 2 in Jaintia Hills District and 3 in West Garo Hills Districts. In four districts namely, Ri-Bhoi, West Khasi Hills, East Garo Hills and South Garo Hills, there are no government hospitals. There are 38 government dispensaries, 88 Primary Health Centres, 389 doctors and 384 nurses. Thus, one government hospital and dispensary serves 48,000 people, one PHC serves 26,000 people, and one doctor and one nurse serves nearly 6000 people; (DES, 2002). Undoubtedly, private hospitals and clinics do exist but their numbers are few, besides being concentrated only in the urban areas. A majority of the population resides in the rural areas and therefore, depending on government health institutions and medical specialists is a cry in the wilderness.

**Education:** Education is an important factor of human development. Every human being, especially every child, has the right to education - learning and knowledge. Article 45 of the Constitution of India states that, the State shall endeavour to provide free and compulsory education for all children until they reach the age of 14 years, within a period of 10 years from the commencement of the Constitution, but this remains an unfulfilled dream. The acquisition of information and knowledge helps an individual improve the quality of life and to participate meaningfully in community life. It opens new worlds and provides access, mobility, opportunities and choices. The society too, benefits when its members are educated. Other indicators of human development such as infant mortality, health status of children, empowerment of women and size of the family are positively linked to educational accomplishments.

Meghalaya has made a stride forward in the last two to three decades, in the field of education. Nonetheless, its attainments are below the national average. The all India literacy rate for the year 2001 is 75.64% for males, 54.03% for females and 65.20% for both males and females. The literacy rate in Meghalaya is however 66.14% for males, 60.41% for females and 63.31% for both males and females. In comparison to other North-Eastern States, Meghalaya's position is at the bottom. Pertaining to literacy rates, urban areas have performed better than rural ones with 59.90% males, 54.02% females and 57.00% combined. On the other hand, in the urban areas, it is 89.90% for males, 84.30% for females and 87.12% for both the sexes (Planning Commission 2002: 186-188). As for overall literary rates, females, both in rural and urban areas, lagged behind roughly by 5% when compared to males. Adult literacy rate in Meghalaya is 54.08% males, 42.61 % females and 48.55% combined, almost at par with the National average of 61.89% for males 34.09 % for females and 48.54 % combined (Planning Commission 2002:193). Although general female literacy and Adult female literacy is higher than the national average, females do not fare well as compared to males in education. In Meghalaya, female drop-out rate is slightly higher than the males' drop – out rate. This is corroborated by the fact that enrollment of girls in primary and secondary levels is higher than that of boys in Khasi and Jaintia areas of Meghalaya (DES, 2002).

Regarding the number of schools, Meghalaya has the highest number of primary schools in the country: Lower Primary (13.38 per thousand); Upper Primary (6.05 per thousand), as compared to the national average: Lower Primary (5.04 per thousand); Upper Primary (2.75 per thousand). The number of pupils per teacher is 35 for Lower Primary; 17 for Upper Primary and 19 for Higher Secondary, which is much lesser than the national average for the year 1997-98 (Lower primary: 42; Upper Primary: 37; Higher Secondary: 29). One can only conclude that it would be pointless to have more schools but lesser number or even no teachers in them! With regards to vocational and technical education, the numbers again, are not very encouraging. Literacy is no doubt the first step, but education at the higher level is imperative to be productive and meaningful.

It is difficult to understand why Meghalaya's literacy rate is low, though introduction of education by the Christian missionaries in the North-Eastern region, first took place in Meghalaya. Besides, till date,

Shillong the capital of Meghalaya continues to be the centre of education for most of the tribal population in the region. What are the factors affecting literacy in general and female literacy in particular? At the initial stage of proselytisation and introduction of education, Khasis did not allow females to attend school, since holding of the quill by females was regarded as a sacrilege (Dutta 1982). This belief became extirpated as more and more people were converted to Christianity. Geographical proximity and problems in transport and communication in the past, was another reason that females could not pursue education. Males therefore, had a monopoly over education at the initial stage and few males like Jeebon Roy and others were educated at University of Dhaka, an occurrence which would have been unthinkable for females at that time. At present, parents do not disfavour any sex in education, one could speculate, however, that female literacy is low not because of discrimination but because female children are often trained at an early age, to assist their mothers in house-chores and childrearing.

**Economic:** Economic attainments of individuals and their well-being have conventionally been captured through indicators like per capita income or per capita GDP of an economy. Economic indicators are generally regarded as an indirect but a good measure of well being. These economic indicators are also useful in capturing the available resources that facilitate other attainments for individuals and the society at large.

Meghalaya, like other North-Eastern states in India as well as other Schedule Tribe areas is slow in economic growth and development. An overwhelming majority of the people in Meghalaya depend on agriculture which is practised and based mainly on swidden cultivation, the slash-and-burn method, known in North-East India as *jhum*.

More than 67% of the working population are cultivators and agricultural labourers (DES, 2002). Many cash crops have been introduced, but with rudimentary technology, the production level is very low. Low level production and shrinking size of land compel more and more people to move away from their villages in search of larger and more productive lands elsewhere, or in search of other kinds of employment with better cash reward. Males and females are together involved in the agricultural activities, following their traditional practices of agriculture. For example, 89.70% of males and 69.70% of females are in the rural labour force. In the urban areas, the percentage of women in the labour force is very low (65.0% males and 30.4% females), which

is less than half the number of men or the labour force of women in the rural areas (Planning Commission, 2002: 155-157). In urban areas, male working population is higher than of the females. The concept of 'housewife' is one factor which shrinks the number of women in the urban labour force. In the traditional economy, men, women and even children have well-defined roles in contributing to various means in order to sustain the livelihood of the family. The concept of non-working individuals arises due to changes in the society, and the economy in particular. Household-chore is not taken as productive work; 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 figures indicate that women in Meghalaya contribute markedly, yet their contribution to the family income in particular, and to the society in general, is to a certain extent, undermined.

In most tribal societies, women economic participation is a cognized fact for, Khasi- Pnar and Garo women are hard working in both rural and urban areas. Besides agriculture and its related work, women directly participate in trading and wage-labouring. Some women also work in mines while others in construction related works, etc. Women's percentage in the white-collar jobs is also significant. However, women's proportion is much less than that of men in the higher executive categories, though women outnumber men in the lower ranks or clerical categories. With increasing levels of unemployment among the educated classes, both men and women venture into modern enterprises - gender related as well as gender neutral ones. Despite low-level economic development in the state, both males and females strive towards bettering their livelihood. Meghalaya may not have advanced much in economic terms, but its per capita consumption expenditure for the year 1999-2000 (Rs.639.13 per month) is slightly higher than the national average (Rs.590.98 per month), both in rural and urban areas. The rural- urban difference is also very high (Rs. 563.64 in rural areas and Rs. 971.87 in urban areas); the urban per capita expenditure is Rs. 308.23 more than the rural areas (Planning Commission, 2002:147).

Considering the above highlighted parameters in health, education and economy, one can understand Meghalaya's position in human development within the country. It ranks 21st and 24th position for the years 1981 and 1991, respectively (see Table 13.1). The lower level of



attainments in education, health and means of livelihood is undoubtedly linked to the poor infrastructure and human resources in the state. However it is interesting to note that Meghalaya is in the 4th position in 1981 and 7th position in 1991 in Gender Equality.

### **Gender Empowerment in Meghalaya**

The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) looks at the level of participation of women in the economic and political life of a country as compared to men. It is constructed on the basis of four indicators - the percentage of seats held by women in the parliament, the percentage of women administrators and managers, the percentage of women professionals and technical workers and the gender disparity in earned income which reflects economic independence. GEM reveals whether women can take active part in economic and political life, while at the same time exposing inequality in opportunities in selected areas.

***Political Participation and Decision Making:*** In the Pre-Independence era, The Government of India Act, 1935 granted women the right to vote on a restricted and limited basis. It provides for Representation of women to the Assam Legislative Assembly and a seat was reserved for women from the Shillong constituency. In 1937, two women, Berlina Diengdoh and Mavis Dunn contested the elections which was won by the latter. She became the first the woman to be inducted as Cabinet minister from the North-East Region of India. She was inducted in the Muhamud Saadulla Ministry in 1939-1941 and 1942-1945. In the 1946 elections, four women contested the Reserved Shillong seat and Bonnily Khongmen proved successful.

India granted Universal Adult Franchise in 1949, and the first General Elections was held in the year 1952. In the first Lok Sabha Elections of 1952, Bonnily Khongmen contested and won, thereby becoming the first tribal lady from Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills to represent the people in the Lok Sabha.

Meghalaya attained statehood on the 21st of January 1972, and in the first general elections held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1972, 11 women contested (8 from Khasi Hills and 3 from Garo Hills); none were elected from Khasi Hills and from Garo Hills Percyline R. Marak was the successful candidate. In the 1978 General Elections, 10 women contested (7 from Khasi Hills and 3 from Garo hills); Maysalin War was elected from Khasi Hills and Mariam D. Shira from the Garo Hills. In the 1983

General Election, 8 women contested (7 from Khasi Hills and 1 from Garo hills); however, none was elected. In 1988 General Elections, 3 women contested (2 from Khasi Hills and 1 from Garo hills); Maysalin War was elected from Khasi Hills and Mariam D. Shira from Garo Hills and both were inducted as Cabinet Ministers. In the 1993 General Election, 7 women contested - 5 from Khasi Hills and 2 from Garo hills; only Roshan Warjri from Khasi Hills was elected and she was inducted as cabinet Minister. In the 1998 General Elections, 14 women contested - 11 from Khasi Hills and 3 from Garo hills; Maysalin War and Deborah C. Marak were elected. In the 2003 General Elections again 14 women contested, and Irin Lyngdoh and Deborah C. Marak were elected. In the Bye-Election, Jopsimon Phanbuh (wife of Late T.H. Rngad) won the contest. In the 2008 General Elections, 14 women contested, Ampareen M Lyngdoh was elected in this election as well as in the 2009 Bye-Election.

Thus, in the 7 General Elections in Meghalaya held so far; 65 women have contested out of 1985 contestants and only 12 women have been elected so far. This is the glaring statistics on the women's and men's percentage share of seats in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Albeit, few women have contested in the elections, the turnover of female voters at times exceeds that of males. Could this be an indication that women do not favour women as politicians? Or, could there be other reasons that discouraged women from being active as candidates?

Political leaders reason that women in Meghalaya do not need reservation. CEM's of the three Autonomous District Councils have opposed reservation grounds that "women are debarred from taking part in traditional political institutions". A female Cabinet Minister of the State during 1998-2003, remarked that Meghalaya "being a Matrilineal Society, women are equal to men, and do not require reservations" (Telegraph 1<sup>st</sup> June 2001). Roshan Warjri is the lone lady politician who has expressed the need for reservation for women.

According to the National Family Health Survey (IIPS, 2009: 52), women's share among those who earn cash at 22.7%, is below the National average at 28.5%. The proportion of employed women working in professional, technical, or managerial occupations at 10.4% however, is better than the National average of 8%.

Besides the formal public decision making, decision making in the private domain reflect gender equity in a society of inequity. Almost half

the population in Meghalaya (men 53% and women 54%) agree that, women do have a certain degree of control over their sexuality, and that it was justifiable for a wife to refuse sex if that was based on certain valid reasons.

All over the world, women face harassment and even violence either in the privacy of their homes or in the public arena. To a degree, this is also true of Meghalaya, where women increasingly need to cope with aggression and violence. Though, spousal sexual violence of 1% is the least in the country, emotional spousal violence at 5.6% is also very low, while physical spousal violence stands at 11.7%. It is interesting to note that more men (63.5%) than women (53.2%) agree that a husband is justified in beating his wife on certain grounds. (IIPS, 2009: 81). Crimes against women are on the rise - in 1991 there were 27 cases of rape, 17 cases of molestation and 5 cases of kidnapping and abduction. The figures increased in 1998 during which there were 42 cases of rape, 12 cases of molestation and 16 cases of kidnapping and abduction (Planning Commission, 2002: 281-282). Increasing violence against women in the society makes women vulnerable. Women's insecurity curbs their independence and mobility and statistics reflect this. About 28% of the women are not allowed to go unattended to the market or even a health facility (IIPS, 2009:68).

### **Concluding remarks**

Statistics show that women all over the world lag behind men. The differences are in educational attainments as measured by literacy rates and school enrollment figures, in the share of earned income as measured by female work participation rate (FWPR), and proportional rate of female wages to male wages. Other gaps are in the health status of males and females, measured by life expectancy at birth (LEB) and infant mortality rates (IMR). The failure of many countries including India, in bringing down fertility rates or infant and maternal mortality rates, despite large expenditures on family welfare and population control measures, is attributable in part, to low female literacy rates and low levels of education.

In calculating HDI and GEI the three indicators - health, educational attainment and economic attainment are equally important variables. Reflecting on all the three indicators, the areas of serious concern are high fertility rates, maternal health, literacy rate and education. Though women's contribution to economic activity in the State, as reflected in the

labour force participation, is substantial, their share to cash income is small. If education and health variables are common for both GEI and HDI (Table 13.1), would a difference between the two indices due to variables be considered for economic attainment? If on the one hand, women's position on education and health is disheartening, on the other is the question whether the substantial labour force participation of women in Meghalaya has the ability to elevate their position in society. Further, would it also imply that women's economic participation and economic rights can raise the level of gender equality in Meghalaya, despite the odds in education, health and political participation?

Because of the great degree of Gender Equality in Meghalaya, would it mean that women here are empowered individuals? The section on Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) speaks clearly about the position of women in the modern political and administrative decision making process. Traditionally, it is the men who occupy the political and administrative offices, but this does not mean that women have no roles in the decision making - their roles are indirectly affected through the lineage/clan councils. Violence and crimes against women unheard of in the past, has surfaced and steadily increased over the years.

Many studies have established the critical role of female literacy in human development, specifically the inverse co-relation between female literacy and infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates. Literate women are better able to look after the health needs of their children, and it is a fact that early childhood care is almost exclusively the domain of women. Better education of women is empowering as well, since it opens doors to employment, mobility and a wider world. Education makes women capable of direct intervention in personal, family and social decision making processes. But as women journeyed along the paths to higher education, there were also many drop-outs. At the primary level, the enrollment rate for girls is initially high but steadily declines. The drop-out rate reflects wastage of resources, potential, skill and embodies a cost that is borne by society today, and will continue to be borne in the future. Early marriage is often cited as a factor hampering women's education in India, but this is however an unlikely causal factor in Meghalaya, since the institution of child marriage is not prevalent in the society.

Women's participation in economic activity and their control over the income earned, are critical for use in health care and education, not

only for themselves but for their families. Women perform household labour, and a considerable portion of socially productive labour. Yet, women's labour contribution has not been recognised, nor has it been given due remuneration and respect. With urbanization and monetisation of the economy, women's burdens have increased, though this is not reflected in their share of the income. Women's wages tend to be lower than wages for corresponding work by men. Much of women's labour is non-waged, since it is categorised as household labour, even when it is for market consumption. Consequently, even if women's share of work is larger, and this is true of most societies, their share of income is lower.

Political Participation as captured in the GEM, stressed more on women's participation in the formal electoral and administrative processes. However, for political participation to be meaningful, it should include the gamut of activities which have a bearing on the political processes, such as voting, membership of political parties, dissemination of political views and opinions among the electorate and other related activities. Besides, political participation can include involvement in any form of organized activity that affects or seeks to affect power relations. Broadly, it may include women's participation in protests, movements, *etc.* that intend to influence the attitudes and behaviour of those who are in power and who make decisions. Political Participation need not necessarily refer to the formal power to make decisions.

It is imperative that the gender dimensions of development and societal advancement be adequately addressed. If women had control over the decision making process, they would surely allocate resources not just to themselves, but to others, in a more equitable way than at present. The participation of women in political processes is therefore important, and women should be proactive in the public political arena.

Gender sensitisation of public functionaries is essential. This is a task that can be performed by the existing training infrastructure of the State through training modules developed in conjunction with experts. In addition, gender sensitisation exercises will require to be undertaken at all levels- at schools, colleges, villages, offices, in the media, in hospitals and hotels, so as to overcome the traditional mindset. Advocacy and social change must necessarily be a part of this initiative.

Violence against women in all forms needs to be confronted through control mechanisms that are sensitive and approachable by women. The true spirit of matrilineal society and culture, where men and women are

equal partners- complementing and supplementing one another - needs to be imbibed for unequivocal gender equity. Without doubt, gender equity and women's empowerment are central to the process of human development. Consequently, not only women, but men too, need to be proactive in all forms of inequality in the society, specifically in gender inequality. As such, the desired level of human development and quality of life, where no threat is felt by any individual regardless of sex and gender, can be achieved.

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# 14

## Beyond Prescribed Roles (Shall the hen crow?) – A Brief Look at Khasi Society

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*Iamon M Syiem*

There are competing ideologies about gender roles in today's world. Women hear, often conflicting messages, the old traditional – 'women's place is in the home,' at the same time, 'women's place is every place', *i.e.* the call for women to come out of their homes and participate in the larger society. Whenever alternative ideologies appear, the established ideology is challenged and re-examined. Increasingly people, by whom we mean here, women, are stepping out of their traditional gender roles and assuming new identities for themselves wherever there is structural accommodation in the larger society beyond the family domain and traditionally restricted spaces.

While more societies are opening doors, albeit reluctantly for women, socially, economically, politically and even in religious life, we cannot ignore certain ground realities. However 'developed' the society, women have to struggle against socially constructed impediments, to achieve a certain parity with males; more so, in the third world countries which include tribal societies.

The gender message that of identity is reinforced by the process of socialization and gender training in the roles that society has already prescribed for males and females. Traditional gender roles have been one way to allocate responsibilities, opportunities and rewards in all our societal institutions. (Davidson and Gordon). It cannot be denied that social forces and institutions determine the opportunities and limitations

for individuals and groups. To be fair, we cannot ignore the fact that the larger social institutions such as the political and economic systems limit everyone, males included. In a hierarchically structured society, life chances in the form of economic opportunities or administrative positions may be more available to certain sections of the population, such as the educated and the socially privileged. They are scarce and even more limiting for women. Even in most tribal societies which traditionally, are not so stratified, it is evident that with an emerging middle class, the economic and political opportunities are availed mostly by the educated and the privileged. Women thus, have to overcome not just the handicaps of their class or caste but of their gender as well.

Traditional gender expectations, social control, effective internalization of the dominant cultural norms and values, economic and political constraints, and individual fears and uncertainties increase conformity of behaviour. The more the cultural system is integrated into the values, attitudes, perception, world view and behaviour patterns of the individuals and groups, the slower and less intense will be the impact of the external factors of change. Close knit, kinship based tribal societies today however, have seriously to reckon with the external forces that are questioning and weakening the fabric of these societies and testing their internal strengths.

Gender roles cannot be described and analyzed accurately without considering the context of the more immediate economic and social structures in which people live. (Davidson and Gordon). Within the scope of this brief discussion, we will attempt to examine traditional women's identity and role in the matrilineal Khasi Society. We would also present certain observations which need further empirical evidence in the area of political participation, in the social inhibitions and the need for social empowerment to facilitate this participation, if women are to step out significantly out of their kinship and gender prescribed spaces.

### **Traditional Identities**

Matrilineal women in Khasi Society, have a greater socio-economic and religious space and mobility than their sisters in patrilineal cultures. A Khasi woman has respect, protection but fewer restrictions, and a voice within the family and kinship group. However, she does not function independently. She is dependent on her maternal kinsmen, more specifically her maternal uncles or mother's brother (s), her own brothers, and in effect, on the strong kinship principles and relationships



that undergird Khasi matriliney. The kinship system is sanctioned by the strong belief system in a Creator God (*U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*) who has ordained all this.

A brief look at some of the roles Khasi women play in their various identities will give some indication not only of their position in traditional society, but to a large extent, even of their position in this day and age. When a girl child is born, the family heaves a sigh of 'social relief' for a girl child will ensure the continuity of that family, that particular line or womb (*kpoh*), that particular clan (*kur*). If there are other siblings and she is the youngest daughter, she is known as '*ka khatduh*', often affectionately referred to as '*ka Duh*' from childhood, in many families. That remains her identity and she is used to it more than her name.

The *Khatduh* symbolizes an institution that is an integral part of Khasi matriliney and kinship. From childhood, the socialization process revolves around her future role as caretaker of her family, her parental house, and the custodian of her family property. She is allotted what some writers describe as 'the lion's share of the property.' However, it must be pointed out that not all families have significant wealth. The whole purpose of custodianship and holding family assets in trust is to enable the *Khatduh* to fulfil certain obligations and duties. She is entrusted with the care of her parents during life and to fulfil funeral obligations at the time of their death. Customarily, she has to complete the necessary rites till the final internment of bones in a kind of clan cromlech (*Mawbah*). This includes her maternal primary kin, excluding her father and affines. In life and death, the well-being of her maternal kin (*'Ka Kpoh'*, literally from the same 'Womb') is her main responsibility. Her home, which is the parental house, is the focal point for religious and socio-economic activities. It serves as a refuge for the down and out, the widowed/ widower, the homeless, orphans and the needy. Financially, she may not be in a position to fulfil these obligations but it is mandatory on her to do the best that she can. Close kin help where they can, but it still remains the *Khatduh's* expected role.

The '*Khatduh*' traditionally has another role. '*Ka Khatduh ka bat ia ka Niam*' describes the '*Khatduh*' as the 'keeper, the unifying factor in the Khasi belief system. Earlier Khasi Society had no organized religion. It was more of a family worship in which the maternal uncle takes the role of the family 'priest' (*'U Suidnia'*) or negotiator, and the '*Khatduh*' assists him in all practical requirements. Her identity, her role, her fate has

been sealed from the moment she is born a '*Khatduh*'. By virtue of her socio-economic and religious responsibilities, she has a highly favoured position in society more than her other sisters, and she can wield a tremendous influence in the lives of her immediate maternal kin. Her status is empowered by the kinship group – the clan, of which other members, especially the maternal uncle(s) reinforce her role and identity. Today, in the urban areas, the role and influence of the maternal uncle(s) has noticeably decreased, and the supportive kinship group ('*ka Kur*') has emerged in other forms of solidarity as well as clan organizations. In all this, the institution of the '*Khatduh*' remains. She is a prominent kinswoman.

Revolving round the '*Khatduh*', who is the central gender and kinship identity, are the other matrilineal women and their roles. They are kinswomen who are also treated with equal respect, protection, support and affection. A woman is a daughter, a wife, a mother or an aunt. Different terms are given for the mother's sisters with the prefix '*Mei*' which means 'Mother'. She is also the loved mother's mother ('*Meieit*'). As the father's mother, she is the revered '*Meikha*', the one who gives life and stature, whom obeisance ('*nguh Meikha*') and social obligations are directed to, during her life and death. The father's sisters and his kinswomen are respected as '*ki kha*' (affinal kin). In fact, the basic tenet in Khasi society is '*Ka tip kur tip kha*' (the system of reckoning maternal and paternal kin) and '*ka tip briew tip Blei*' ('knowing' or relationship with man and God).

A woman is secure in these kinship roles. Her identity is ascribed by these role expectations and they have their own opportunities, rewards as well as social limitations. A woman's function and participation is limited to her family, her kin, in the field of cultivation and in the market place where she may engage in business and trade. However customarily, in the wider sphere of village administration and political affairs, she is not permitted to participate.

Social attitudes about the abilities and involvement of women outside the domestic domain are often reflected through various sayings – '*wei la kynih ka syiar kynthei te ka pyrthei ka la wai*', which translates 'once a hen crows, it heralds the end of the world' (which signifies social extinction if women step out of their roles). Women are also referred to as '*Kynthei (ki) khynnah*' putting women (*kynthei*) in the same category as '*Khynnah*' (children). She is also '*Ka Kynthei shi bor*' (women with a

single ability or capacity) while men have '*Khadar bor*' (literally, twelve powers or abilities). Thus, women are seen to have limited capabilities in comparison to men, who have multiple abilities to perform whatever is needed in society.

The need for women's empowerment is most clearly seen in the area of political participation and administrative ability. As we have seen, in most other areas of socio-economic life, women have certain responsible positions, honour and privileges notwithstanding the limitations of decision-making in matters relating to the corporate life of the kinship group and the society. However, in terms of leadership, voicing of opinions in the village or State '*dorbars*' (Councils), and decision-making in political and administrative matters, it is the males who preside exclusively. Traditionally, men have been the hunters, the warriors, the administrators and decision-makers in the village, '*himas*' (small kingships) and the larger political life. In the words of the theologian O.L. Snaitang, "Matrilinealism sanctions man alone to exercise legislative, administrative, executive, judicial and priestly responsibilities in the community". Khasis have always been proud of their 'democratic' system of governance. Nevertheless, one has to ask how 'democratic' are these institutions if women are excluded from the decision making process?

This has been the normative pattern in the past. However, Khasi society is in a state of transition. It has been undergoing rapid and radical changes ever since the British came to these hills, even though it was, by no means insulated from other economic and cultural interactions before that. The most significant changes can be gauged in the urbanized areas. Education and non-traditional occupations, Christianity, modernization and the process of urbanization, the influence of other Patrilineal cultures as well as the political process, among other factors, have impacted on patterns and standards of living, values, attitudes and world-view and the belief system, especially of the urban Khasi. Tradition and customs, while still seen in all the life processes from birth to marriage to death, are followed more as symbols of a changing culture rather than with deep-rooted conviction, especially among the younger generation and among those who profess another faith.

In this urban context of social change, new concepts of gender identity and social roles are emerging for both men and women. The Khasi male traditionally play a dual role, that of a maternal uncle and of a father. Today, with the influence of Christian patriarchal values and other patriarchal cultures, the role of the father is acquiring new dimensions

and significance with the increase in 'nuclear family' set-ups. There are significant non-clan (social, economic, political and religious) interactions that have diminished the frequency and intensity of clan interactions and also decreased the influence of the maternal uncles and the wider kinship group. Control and power have merely shifted from the maternal to the paternal males. We cannot ignore the fact that patriarchal values do exist in Khasi matriliney and they are more visible now as roles are redefined. Women's position has not essentially shifted; they still remain in a dependent, subordinate position. Nevertheless, we also observe that there has been significant changes in women's involvement and participation in the larger social life. As elsewhere, more women are educated and participating gainfully in the wider socio-economic world outside their homes and outside their traditionally prescribed roles. They are confidently contributing to society as professionals, business women, involved in cultural activities, raising their voice through social organizations and are actively involved in religious activities, which here reads church activities for Christians, and even as able administrators in key positions. It is only in the political arena, in leadership positions that women's participation has not been encouraging. Women have played more of a supportive role in politics - as party workers, campaigners and speakers, and active in the various women's wings. They have not made very convincing attempts to contest for elections. The few who have 'dared' to step out to challenge the assumption of what men can do and women cannot do, have not been whole heartedly supported even by their own party colleagues. On some occasions women were denied the party ticket for election to the autonomous District Council (M.D.C.), and nomination for election to the State Legislative Assemblies were not encouraging either. That is not to say that women have not been forthcoming; there are those who have contested in the elections, won and even reached the honoured post of Member of Parliament (Mrs. B. Khongmen), but these constitute a paltry few.

Political space has opened up to women. The fact remains, while political awareness is growing especially, among the educated women, the number of women actually actively involved in the political arena is insignificant. It is in this area as elsewhere, that the question of empowerment gains relevance. Women in the Khasi society have greater mobility and space in family, kinship, economic and social life. She is more confident in moving further in these socially prescribed spaces in new non-traditional situations. But in the area of politics, there is evident

reluctance for greater number of women to participate and contest for elections in the District councils, State legislatures and even in the locality or village "*dorbar*". Only in a few localities are women chosen as representatives of the women population or nominally given an executive post in the locality '*dorbars*'. Although women's opinions are respected, the attitude seems to be more of tolerance rather than conceding their rights. Women's inhibition to enter the sphere of politics is, as seen earlier, rooted in the traditional social system. On the one hand, males in general have not really changed in their attitudes about women's involvement in these decision-making spaces. Most males are conditioned to make 'institutional responses', which reinforce the power relations between men and women. On the other, traditional expectation is that women should take care of the socio-economic and religious life of the family. Their mobility is limited within what is socially prescribed for them. Males are not comfortable about women's presence and participation in a domain that had been traditionally theirs. Even if the women are educated and have increasingly proved themselves in the larger social life, there is a lingering doubt about their abilities, stamina or even conviction. However, that is not to say that there is an increasing male population who do not concede that women do and can make positive changes in society through politics and in other decision making capacities. For a major attitudinal shift however, women do need to increasingly prove themselves as being competent, knowledgeable and responsible in this area.

The other more significant hindrance has come from women's attitudes themselves and their own self-perceptions. Despite their competence in other areas of social life their lack of interest, lack of knowledge, lack of political skills and experience in understanding the ways of administration have undermined their confidence to step out into this political area, previously prohibited to them. Women have not been socialized to engage in these non-traditional roles. There is also a 'fear of failure' and to a certain extent, a 'fear of success' that inhibits women to fully explore their potential. The 'fear of failure' comes from their perceived lack of skills needed to fulfil these re-defined gender and social roles. Another aspect of this fear comes from not being actively supported and affirmed by other women. Individuals as well as women's groups (with exceptions to some) have not really been active and expressive about their confidence in women's positive contribution to the wider political life. Women's voice in this area is not heard because it is too

feebly expressed. In fact, women have been as negative about women's participation in politics as men, if not more. It is not only men, but women who can empower women. Women need to redefine their roles and step out beyond traditionally prescribed gender territory. Only then, can the gender equations change in terms of perception and power relations.

Women also have ambivalent feelings about success in fields where social expectations are previously unexplored. 'Fear of success' (M. S. Homer) is an obstacle to vocational and intellectual achievement, and this is more prevalent among women. This fear influences behaviour patterns and choices, affecting the future of women and even of men. It is a trait that is the product of internalization of the old value system. Women fear success in jobs and careers because it renders them unfeminine and may result in their inability to fulfil the more traditional, but still important goals of marriage and family formation. (Davidson and Gordon). In fact there have been cases where women have been 'advised' by males not to continue their studies or take certain jobs in case they lose out on marriage. The fear that their success will not be fully accepted, even by their immediate kin, has not encouraged women to boldly step out and strive for intellectual excellence and political brilliance. Besides, for women a job is simply "a job" and not a "career". For the most part, they are more content to play a supportive role than actually 'contend' for leadership positions.

Until recently, Khasi women have been comparatively free from the more obvious exploitation and abuse evident in other Patriarchal societies. But increasingly, women face 'power related problems' like domestic violence and rape. Today, more women are taking up cudgels against social problems that affect their children like alcohol and drugs, corruption and the increasing violence against women, among other things. These are expressed through women's organizations and groups; politics however, has not become a platform for women to address these issues in a consistent way.

There is an emerging middle class in Khasi society as in other tribal societies in the North-East. This further limits the general participation of women in politics because only from the educated middle class will women participation most likely take place. Further, it is only those who have been socially and politically exposed, who have sufficient support and finance, who will venture into this arena.

The cost of women involved in this area, which was previously open only to men, have also to be reckoned. Women would have to

sacrifice not only their time, money, family, and relationships but also their reputation and questions about their integrity. Women who spend time in political activities 'in the company of men at odd hours' have an ambivalent position in society, unless they prove themselves to be above personal reproach and are mature, respectable citizens. For younger women, and the unattached especially, the ambivalent attitude finds expression in different ways, mostly negative. This also deters women from sacrificing so much for an activity (however needed) when the social benefits are dubious and not certain.

Observing the situation such as it is now, it cannot be denied that more and more women have become aware and concerned about the social problems that is destabilizing and creating insecurity in society. They view with concern, the lack of political leadership and political instability that is adversely affecting the youth, especially those who are vocal about political and social issues. Women are discussing these issues in various forums. They are expressing their collective opinions through the various organizations and meets, through newspapers and seminars and their different work places, and out in the public domain. They are sharpening their skills for leadership, opinion-making and influence at these various levels.

At the same time, the fact remains that to step out of these levels of involvement beyond prescribed societal roles, to seriously join the political fray and be more involved in decisions-making process of locality and State, the reluctance is still very obvious. Women's self-perception and self-esteem are changing, but it will probably take another generation of women, socialized in a new way of thinking and behaving, who will fully explore these non-traditional gender roles with a certain amount of confidence, skill and achievement.

***Shall the hen crow?***

***The future will decide and change will take its own course.***

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## Women in the Khasi Matrilineal Society

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*S. Khyriemujat*

### **Introduction**

Sociologists and anthropologists find special interest in matrilineal descent groups because of the issues that have come to the fore in recent years, regarding gender relations and status of women. Such interests may also have been sparked by the authority and control that males exercise over property, in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies. Most scholars working on matrilineal societies and the members of these societies themselves feel that, there is nonetheless, a qualitative difference in the status of women in matrilineal societies, as against societies with a patrilineal set-up. This paper gives an insight into the status and roles of women in the Khasi matrilineal society of Meghalaya.

### **Patrilineal and Matrilineal Descent Systems**

Matrilineal descent systems are found in South Western and North Eastern India, each having their own distinctive characteristics. In South Western India, it is found among the Nairs of Kerala. Studies show that among the Hindu community of the Nairs in Kerala, this practice has almost disappeared. However, it is still prevalent among the Muslim Islanders of Lakshadweep and among the Khasi inhabitants of Meghalaya, both Christian and non Christian.

Descent is the system of deriving relationships from an ancestor.



Both patrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems follow the unilineal rule of descent as individuals trace their descent from members of one sex only—either through the male or the female. “Patrilineal” descent implies descent that is traced from the father’s side. Thus, in patrilineal systems, the children in each generation belong to the descent group of their father, who in turn, belongs to the descent group of his father and so on. It is important to note that, although a man’s sons and daughters are all members of the same descent group, affiliation to that group is transmitted only by the sons. Matrilineal descent however, implies descent that is traced from the mother’s side. It is important to note that, in matrilineal societies, although a woman’s sons and daughters are all members of the same descent group, affiliation to that group is transmitted only by the daughters. Although both patrilineal and matrilineal descent systems are wings of the same unilineal structure, they are not mirror images of one another. Patrilineal systems combine the locus of authority and the channels for replacement in one source only, *i.e.*, men. By contrast, in matrilineal systems, the locus of authority is in the hands of men, while women are only the channels for replacement.

When we consider the role of women in the two systems, we find that in patrilineal systems, it is the ‘wives’ of the male members who reproduce the unilineal descent groups, while in matrilineal systems, it is the ‘sisters’ who do it. In a patrilineal system, a man gains rights over the sexual, domestic and reproductive services of his wife, while in a matrilineal system, he may gain rights only over the first two, but not over the last, as this right is vested in her matrilineage. When we consider the role of men in the two systems, we find that, in patrilineal systems the ‘fathers’ have authoritative control, while in matrilineal systems, this control lies with the ‘brothers’. From the point of view of the roles involved, we find that in patrilineal systems, it is the father-son-brother constellation that predominates, while in matrilineal systems, it is the mother-daughter-brother-sister constellation that dominates. Regarding residential patterns, patrilineal systems are patrilocal whereas matrilineal systems are not simply matrilocal. Due to the major roles played by brothers, particularly the mother’s brothers, avunculocality also occurs. Thus, one may find matrilineal systems being more complicated than patrilineal systems.

Scholars tend to believe that a matrilineal system is inferior to a patrilineal system. The matrilineal system is being looked down upon,

particularly in areas concerning sexual, marital and family customs and practices. One can say therefore, that the superior attitude of the people practicing the patrilineal system arises out of an incorrect understanding of matriliney (Chackco 1998:12).

### The Khasi Matrilineal System

The Khasis follow the matrilineal system of kinship. A Khasi takes his clan (*Kur*) name from the mother. Therefore it is the mother's name that gains significance over the father's, as against the situation in patrilineal societies. The society consists of a number of exogamous clans (*kur*) spread all across the Khasi Hills. Each clan is divided into a number of matrilineal lineages called *kpoh* (womb). Each *kpoh* is further subdivided into a number of domestic groups called *iing*, depending upon the number of daughters in the *kpoh* moving out after marriage, to set up an independent *iing*. It is customary in the Khasi society that the elder daughters, sometime after their marriage, are encouraged to move out of the *iing* of their mothers in order to set-up a new *iing* for themselves, with the support, though, of their mothers and brothers. But for all other purposes, they always remain attached to their matrilineage (*kpoh*). Their brothers keep a close touch with them and take care of them and their children's welfare. In an hour of crisis, these daughters always fall back for support, on their mother's *iing* and resources.

The clan is an exogamous unit and marriage within which amounts to incest. This type of incest when committed is unpardonable before God and man. No ritualistic ceremonies or purification can remedy the incest. Persons guilty of the sacrilege are excommunicated from the clan.

The Khasi household is matrilocal in nature. One important aspect of the matrilocal residence is that, the elder daughters set up a nuclear household after marriage while the youngest daughter (*Ka Khatduh*) continues to stay with her mother. Though the males move out to live with their wives, they keep close contact with their mothers and sisters. This is due to the fact that man belongs to the clan of his mother and his position in the family is an honored one. He is the maternal uncle (*U Kñi*) in his own clan, and a father (*Kpa*) at his wife's family.

The role played by a man in the Khasi matrilineal society is evident right from his infancy, where his importance is visible even at his christening or naming ceremony called *Ka Jer Ka Thoh*. In the naming ceremony of the male child, a replica of a bow and three arrows,(

namely *Ka Tieh Iawbei* and *Ki Nam Iawbei* respectively), form part of the ceremony's items. The arrows signify honesty, strength, integrity, stability, discipline, and straightforwardness. These characteristics are important to any society of the world, so also, in the Khasi society. The first arrow refers to straightforwardness (*Ka longrynieng kaba beii*); the second arrow signifies that he is the defender of the clan, his kith and kin, his community and race as a whole; while the third arrow signifies good health and happiness, not only for himself but for his family, clan and the entire community.

The rule of succession in the Khasi society is matrilineal. While authority goes from the mother's brother to the sister's son, property is handed down from mother to daughter. A man continues to be a member of the same family all his life, irrespective of whether he is married or not. A woman, if she is not the heiress (the youngest daughter), will branch off after her marriage, though she herself will continue as member of her mother's family. The house of the youngest daughter (*Ka Khatduh*) is called *Ka Iing Seng*. All religious matters and rituals are carried out at *Ka Iing Seng*. Each family recognises the youngest daughter (*Ka Khatduh*) of the group as its priestess and the oldest maternal uncle (*Kñi*) as its priest. The maternal uncle plays the key role of defender of the clan and religion (*Ka Niam*). He is also the guide, philosopher, care taker and maker of decisions in the affairs of the clan. The clan council (*Durbar Kur*) takes place at the *Iing Seng*, the youngest daughter's residence, in order to discuss matters relating to the clan.

### **The Role of the Woman**

The woman in the Khasi family is a "mother" to her children, mother of the house, while also being a "wife" to her husband. She also assumes the part of a mother to her brothers and sisters who are still unmarried and living with her. Further, she becomes a motherly figure to her grandchildren begot of the youngest daughter who lives with her under the same roof. The mother is the all-in-all in the family. She plays an important part in preparing all the requirements for rituals performed in the family, and in seeing that these rituals are performed satisfactorily, in accordance with the norms prescribed by society. It is important to mention here that religion in the Khasi Society, (referred to as *Ka Niam* Khasi by the Khasi themselves) is practised without any scriptures. It is practised not only at the level of the individual *iing* (domestic group), *kpoh*

(lineage) and the *Kur* (clan), but also at the level of the *Hima* (this term is translated in the English language as 'State'). *Iing*, as the most important functional descent group, may have a generation depth varying from two to four. The *kpoh* on the other hand, may include two or more *iing*. The role of the mother's brother in the performance of rituals at the level of the domestic group or the lineage is very crucial.

The brothers of the mother become the maternal uncles of her children and her grand children; and the eldest male member (*Kñi*) of the lineage has several roles to play - as a brother to his sisters and a maternal uncle to his sister's children. In the sphere of kinship, he is the caretaker of the members of the matrilineage; in the sphere of marriage of his sisters children, he is the main negotiator; in the sphere of economy, he is the manager of the lineage property which is held in the name of his sisters; in the political sphere, he is the main spokesman in the meetings of the village assembly; and in the sphere of religion, it is his task to perform the various rites. He also presides over the rites and rituals, and takes active part in performing the various rites and ceremonies pertaining to the family. On the other hand, the husband plays the part of the procreator, and it is he who helps multiply the family, either in sons or daughters. He works and provides for the family and sees to it that the family does not fall into poverty or other mishaps that could bring shame upon it.

Regarding the management of wealth belonging to his wife's clan, or regarding the performance of rites within his wife's family, the husband has neither say nor authority. He is regarded as *Khun U Briew* (son of another) who, upon his death, would return to his mother's clan's heavenly abode. Thus the saying "*U Kpa uba lah uba iai bad u Kñi uba tip ha ka iap ha ka im*" (a father provides and an uncle manages the affairs of the family). The father plays a dual role - he is the father and provider in his wife's house yet, at the same time, he has his role as the uncle in his own natal home. It is true that the eldest maternal uncle (*Kñi*) is the head of the house, but the father (husband) is the executive head of the new home, and after children have been born to him, his wife and children live with him. It is he who faces the dangers of the jungles and risk his life for his wife and children. In his wife's clan, he occupies a very high place. He is second to none but the maternal uncle. In his own family circle however, he is a father and a husband closer to his children and his wife respectively, than even the maternal uncle.

As the family expands and the elder daughters move out and start their own families nearby, the household slowly spreads around an area which is then transformed into a *Shnong* (village). It is important to note that, marriage could take place with individuals from other villages; if such occurs, the husband (*shongkha*) will come and stay in his wife's village. It is worth mentioning here that the ancestral mother, along with her brothers will manage the affairs of establishing harmony over the area of the village. Here, too, the mother takes on the role of counsellor, advisor, and a symbol of refuge for her children and grand children. She looks after the proper management of the ancestral wealth of the family and sees to it that it is used in a proper and befitting manner. Her house becomes the centre where all rites and rituals are performed. She assumes the position of *Sohblei* (meaning closest to God or as if "attached" to God) who gathers her clan together, who sees to it that all preparations and requirements for various rituals and ceremonies are done properly and that nothing goes amiss during the performance of these rituals and ceremonies.

The role of women as counsellors, advisers and custodians of ancestral property, is also seen even at the level of the *Hima* (state). A very close connection is visible between the *Syiem*, (who is only a nominal head of the *Hima*), and the *Syiem Sad*. The term *Syiem Sad* refers to a religious office occupied by a female who is related to the *Syiem* through his matrilineage. She could either be his mother or his eldest sister and in the absence of the mother or the sister, a female parallel cousin will assume the status. As per the Khasi religious tradition, no male is eligible to be selected as *Syiem* in case he does not have a female as described, to play the role of *Syiem Sad*. To this day, this tradition is still maintained and followed by *Hima Khyrim* in the Khasi Hills of the state of Meghalaya. Thus, what is witnessed is a collective responsibility as well as the significant services of both males and females towards the *iing* (domestic group), the lineage (*kpoh*), the clan (*kur*), and the state (*Hima*).

## Conclusion

The Khasi society is in the throes of transition. There is a rapid and increasing transformation of the family pattern from the traditional to the nuclear type of family structure. Families today are increasingly no longer confined to a village set-up, where the newly married live in the vicinity of the original parental family. With the coming of the British,

education took a formal turn. This trend, further developed by the various missionary groups, whether Christian or otherwise, have transformed the traditional family and the society at large, along with the roles of men and women. Therefore, it is imperative to attempt a serious re-examination and re-evaluation of the institutions, the laws and the cherished customs, their use and relevance in the present day context. This will certainly provide a clearer picture of the roles of women in the Khasi society.

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### Notes

- *Hima* – Traditionally, different parts of the Khasi Hills were divided under different political entities known as *Hima*.
- *Khatduh* – youngest daughter
- *Kñi* – maternal uncle
- *Kpa*- father
- *Kpoh* – lineage
- *Kur* – clan
- *Shnong* – village
- *Sohblei* –meaning closest to God or as if “attached” to God.
- *Syiem*- nominal Head.

# 16

## Matriliny and its Paradox: A case study of Garo Women

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*L.D. Marak*

### **Origin of Matrilineal System**

The Garos are one of the tribes in the western part of Meghalaya, who call themselves *A-chik Mande* which literally means "hill people". According to an oral tradition, the Garos originally came to Garo Hills from Torua in Tibet about 1500 (approx) years ago. On many occasions, while crossing the banks of the Brahmaputra River, the Garos had to fight with neighbouring kings resulting in the death of many Garo men. While men went out to fight, women stayed back to mind the children and look after the homestead. They held a meeting in a place called '*Matia Panchia*' and decided to keep daughters at home and to trace the lineage through the mother's name. Property among the Garos is owned by women while menfolk managed the property, governed the society and domestic affairs. The Garos understand that men and women are born different with distinct-biological functions. Consequently, men and women must naturally be assigned different social roles and tasks. "Man is intended by nature to do all the rough and hard work for earning bread while woman is designed for household affairs, duties less strenuous, but requiring a good deal of love and affection, which none but alone she can bestow." (Status of Hindu Women by Madhu Shastri)

Most anthropologists do not believe in the existence of any true matriarchy. However, it is suggested that there exists three characteristics

of matriarchy, viz., descent through the mother (family name through mother), matriolocal residential system (husband lives at the residence of the wife after marriage) and inheritance of property by females. Thus, any society that follows these three norms can be called a 'Matrilineal Society'.

### **Position of Women**

The position of women in any civilization shows the stage of evolution at which that civilization has arrived. The position of women in any legal system is determined by her rights, duties, liabilities, society and her family members, the estates and her property rights.

In Garo society, the position of women shatters the myth about the status of women being higher in a matriarchal and matrilineal society. For instance, the Garo society of the late nineteenth century, while being matrilineal, was very clearly patriarchal. Generally, we assume that women suffer less in matriarchal societies, but that is a myth. If one observes the position of the Garo women one finds, ironic deviations. 'Patriarchy' in the Garo society is a strong presence and this is reflected in Jonmoni D. Shira's poem 'I, the woman'.

*In the small hours of the morning  
I get up and cook  
I spent the whole day  
In the field.*

In a society of Jhumia, women have a lot of work to do. From the first to the third stanza of the poem, Shira suggests that being born a woman is considered a misfortune. It is a misfortune because the first woman on earth i.e. Eve committed a sin. Further, she is taught to be under male domination, and in the poem, a sense of resignation to her fate is conveyed by the words "I cannot alter it."

*Poor Eve committed a sin  
Before the world,  
Bringing heavier burdens and worries  
Upon the woman.*

*From birth, her strength is less  
Her face is lovelier,*



*But I am taught  
To be under male domination.*

Not only were women roughly and unequally treated by their husbands, they were also not honoured by men who completely controlled their lives. The fourth stanza of the poem conveys the plight of women –

*From tender age  
I have to live under the control of man,  
At the slap of my younger brother  
I weep loudly.*

Generally, it is significant to note that in a matriarchal society, the mother reigns over the family and she is the supreme head of the household. In spite of that, in the Garo society, the father is the head of the family and he is given all the responsibilities of the family's affairs. What we read from the poem is that a woman is taught not to pursue her dreams simply because she does not have the right to reason. "Silence you stupid woman" are the words in the poem that echo this. The wife is subordinate in spite of uxoclocal residence. Men occupy the centre of the room, while women are given the lower seats near the entrance. Thus, the higher status of the husband and the establishment of the paternal authority are based not only on the unique arrangement of the marriage, but also on the actual economic contribution of the husband as manager, as well as worker.

Typically, adult men and children are fed first. Women eat only after the men have finished, as conveyed by the lines –

*To sit in the dumping place  
To eat the leftovers is my lot.*

The superior position that the Garo male enjoys is also revealed in matters relating to marriage. In Garo Society, marriage proposal may come from women, but the actual marriage is brought about by male relatives. Further, Garo customary laws provide for a widow or widower's remarriage through the existing practice of *On-songa*. This custom is unique as it does not exist in any other society or tribe. Here again, a widow cannot remarry without the permission of the male members of her family. Sometimes, a widow may be forced to marry for the sole consideration of her property. However, in such cases, the man

may take a second wife. This practice of polygyny is another instance of man's superior position in society. A husband may take one or two more wives provided he obtains the permission of the first wife and her relations. A second wife mostly belongs to the same clan or *mahari* with that of the first wife. She may be a younger sister or any other relation of the same *ma-chong* or clan. The chief wife is known as *Jikmongma* (Principal wife) and the second wife is called *Jikgite* (Concubine). The second wife is also looked upon as lawfully married and there is no shame attached to the last name, however, the former wife takes precedence over the latter.

The custom of giving dowries and presents do not exist amongst the Garos, yet wealthy parents may gift their sons with a sword, a shield, a spear, a cow, a bull or even money. The husband-wife relationship at times reveals traits uncommon in the patrilineal structure - when neither the authority of the husband nor the subordination of the wife is exercised to extremities. There are possible occasions where the relationship is characterized by a certain level of understanding even when the woman fails in the execution of her husband's wishes and expectations, inspite of being economically dependent on him.

Yet, a totally different scenario may exist, one in which the difficulties of the woman are multiplied after marriage. She is beaten by her husband and has to work the fields by day and husk rice by night. The torment of disease, coupled with years of toil possibly transform her into an unattractive woman. Consequently, her husband pursues someone else. In spite of all the agony, the woman patiently bears her oppressions, never failing in obedience, loyalty and adoration for her erring husband. The poet has captured such a situation in the words -

*If my word is wrong,  
Refute it,  
If you yourself are at fault  
Repent now.*

In a society of *Jhumias*, women greatly contribute to the workforce. In addition to their regular schedule, Garo women have to prepare rice beer, a popular drink greatly loved by the Garos. The question is how could the Garos who pin so much value to matriarchy accord such a status to women? The question persists whether Garo women had always been treated in this manner or did their position

deteriorate with development of de facto household rights. The society is changing from *jhumming* to modernity. It would be of interest to know what is happening to the status of women in the changing scenario.

### Marriage of Daughters

Traditionally, marriages concern families rather than individuals and are arranged while the principals are still very young. A daughter is traditionally married to her father's nephew, her cousin; the heiress of the family is known as *Nokna* and her husband is called *Nokkrom*. After marriage, a bridegroom or *Nokkrom* moves in to the *Nokna's* house and is under obligation to maintain his in-laws. He also acquires the right to manage the property of his wife. However, if *Nokna* fails to maintain her parents and stays away from them, she loses her rights to the property.

According to Garo society, when a husband deserts or divorces his wife, she has no right to claim for family maintenance, but under *A.kim* bond, she is entitled to remarry from her husband's clan. If the clan members fail to provide a substitute husband for her, she is generally released from *A.kim* bond and she will be at liberty to marry someone else according to her own choice. This system is applicable for both *Nokna* and the other women of the Garo society.

Child marriage was prevalent among the Garos. The traditional marriage had particular implications for girls, who were under great pressure to marry by the time they reached puberty, or very soon thereafter. According to Garo social ethos, a bachelor should have a virgin wife. When a bachelor had to marry a widow, one of her daughters was usually declared as an additional wife, known as *chapa* or *dokchapa*. In such a case, even an infant daughter by a former husband theoretically becomes a wife of the stepfather. But with the advent of education and modernization, this traditional social evil system is disappearing. Further, girls have also become more educated as well as conscious of their rights.

Over the past several decades, however, there has been a marked change in the marriage pattern of the Garo society. Social, economic and demographic developments have made marriages between close relatives less common.

### Women and Education

When it comes to education, females are clearly disadvantaged in Garo Hills compared to their peers in other parts of the country. The

*Nokpante* or the bachelor's dormitory was the only traditional institution which could be regarded as the centre of learning among the Garos. Women were therefore deprived of the right to education. Illiteracy is very common especially among females. The advent of the American Baptist Mission initiated education for girls. However, in parts of Garo hills where *jhumming* is still practiced, enrollment of girls in schools, as well the opportunities to continue her education largely depends on the socio economic status of her family. In rural areas, girls from families with little or no land, or with limited resources, are less likely to enroll in schools and more likely to be withdrawn early, compared to those from landed families. Early marriage and the need for female labour at home were also other reasons for the abrupt withdrawal of many girls from schools.

### **Changing Trends in the Traditional Society of Garo Hills**

With the expansion of education, development of transport and communication, technological advances and spread of Christianity, a lot of changes have taken place in the present Garo society. Moreover, the age old practice of *jhumming* is fast being replaced by modernity. Further research needs to be done to study the present situation of the status of the Garo women.

Education plays a vital role in empowering and maintaining the status of women. Through education, a woman is able to acquire knowledge, gain self confidence and look for avenues of self achievement. Development of society in rural areas is largely dependent on female literacy. With regards to traditional education, it has been observed that in the present society, the institution of *Nokpante* is almost disappearing. Modern education, technology and religion have changed the outlook of the Garo society. In this modern life, all the family members live in the same house with modern amenities of life.

Modern education, outward contact and technological changes have provided Garo women with the tools to influence the male members of the society. Women are moving out of their domestic spheres to mainstream national life and are also seeking white collar jobs. With the induction of the District Autonomous Council, Garo customary laws also underwent changes. "The more educated the woman is, the more likely she is to want and to be able to obtain contraceptive services, modern preventive and curative health care, immunizations and schooling for both her male and female children, and the less likely she is to want her

daughters to marry early.” (Peer Reviewed Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol-2, 2012, Don Bosco College, Tura).

Traditional Garo society has experienced the prevalence of evil social practices and customs. But under the influence of the Christian religion, many of the evils have been done away with. For example, Christianity strictly prohibits the traditional practice of polygamy and polygyny. Thus, in the Christian Garo household, one would observe the absence of a second wife or a mother-in-law turned “wife” of the son-in-law after the death of the father-in-law. This has significantly changed the position of the mother-in-law in the household.

As mentioned above, the *Mahari* and menfolk played a pivotal role in the affairs of the family and society; and in household decision making, the voice of the male was final. But in the present society, a notable change is seen in the role of *Mahari*. It has now become flexible, denoting a clear response to the changing circumstances. In the traditional society, even if girls choose their own partners, marriages were completely dependent on *Mahari*. However, in this modern generation, girls have more freedom in this matter.

Adoption of a girl child in families having only sons is also on the decline. If there are no daughters in the family, the influence of education has led many to encourage sons to stay at home, if they so desire. According to the Garo traditional law, sons are driven out from their houses. The educated generation is however of the opinion that, the adoption of a girl child is unnecessary if there are sons in the family. Thus the practice of the adoption of a girl child is also on the decline.

The general view is that there is more awareness among the women of the region. Women are well aware of the importance of media and communication in the present day. There is also an awareness of the present day environmental degradation. For instance, essay competitions, debate competitions are conducted in the rural and sub-urban areas by women NGO's in the villages to create environmental awareness. Further, Organizations like Mother's Union of Tura are imparting training to women groups especially on growing tea saplings, cashew nut, rubber and so on.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Garo society is definitely undergoing a process of positive change. On the one hand, the

juxtaposition of modernity and tradition seems to have discomfited modern living, yet on the other hand, a balance has to be struck between the two, in order to promote a healthy society. With the expansion of education, rapid urbanization, technological advancement and awareness through education and communication, the status and position of women in Garo matrilineal society will surely take an upward trend.

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## The Role of the Khadduh

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*Amanda Basaiawmoit  
Naomi C. Nonglait*

Each and every *Khasi* can trace his lineage back to *Ka iaw-bei* or the ancient ancestress or ancient mother. Every child born of a *Khasi* mother belongs to her and this is how the *Khasi* nationality is maintained. A man cannot claim lineage in a *Khasi* society, as for centuries this society has followed the matrilineal custom. Even in the case where a father is a non-*Khasi* and the mother is a *Khasi*, the children are supposed to be *Khasis* and not of a mixed identity. Therefore, the usual problem and stigma that a society experiences and faces regarding an illegitimate child do not really pose a problem to the *Khasis* since the lineage is traced to the mother. A.S. Khongphai makes an observation where:

*Khasi law cannot apply to a person who is not a Khasi by birth, in other words, a Khasi must be born and not made. Khasis reckon their jait from the mother, and cannot take the jait of the father, and thus a son belongs to the mother, the mother to her mother, back to the primeval ancestress of the jait, known as Ka Iawbei (law= ancient, and bei= mother; ancient mother or ancestress). (Principles of Khasi Law 2-3)*

From the observation made by Khongphai, one can say that a large number of *Khasis* born of a mixed parentage, where the father is a *Khasi* and the mother is a non-*Khasi*, become *Khasis* once they are assimilated through the ages by the *Khasi* society. Such *jait* or clan, when assimilated

into the *Khasi* society forms a new clan altogether. In this regard, David Roy states:

*A Khasi marries men and women of all races; to his Khasi parent the issues are all one and the same without any distinction of caste or creed, of colour or possessions. The children are the "khun-kha" (khun means child, kha means born, i.e. children who are born through the union of a descendant of the parent with one of another parent), and these are unified into the families and are assimilated in their Khasi idea of life while these groups of families are traced to their mother and are made to revolve on this ancestress as the pivot of their existence. (David Roy: A Khasi Remembered: A collection of his writings on the Khasis 102-103)*

The question that arises here is what happens to the *Khadduh* or the youngest daughter of the family when she marries outside the *Khasi* society. If she marries a non-*Khasi*, she still remains within the clan and her children will bear her surname. So when the father is a non-*Khasi*, the children are automatically considered to be *Khasis*. Further, the father who is a non-*Khasi* should try to adapt himself to his wife's culture. He should be the one who moves out of his home and family in order to stay with his wife. Since this is the usual custom, the man has to accept the difference in culture. The problem that arises here is that a non-*Khasi* male is bound by his own traditions and customs. He comes from a patriarchal system whereby a man has the right to inherit and hold all property. He therefore, follows his own system of inheritance.

This does not mean that a *Khasi* male cannot acquire property. The *Khasi* male can acquire property and the inheritance of it will again depend on whether he bought the property before or after marriage. If the property is bought before marriage, it belongs to the *kur* or the relatives. However, if he bought it after marriage, then it belongs to the wife and the children and they have every right to it. However, in case there are no children involved, the property would go to the *kur*, provided the wife had not contributed monetarily in buying the property. David Roy has laid down a clear explanation in his essay, "Self Acquired Property of a Male" with regards to the acquisition of property by a *Khasi* male:

*The son on marriage cannot take his previous earnings away from the house of his mother or sister, where he has been living, to that of his wife. On marriage he becomes the executive head of the house where he lives with his wife and children. His earnings, deposited in his wife's house, are presumed to be part of the common stock of the household consisting of*



his wife and children. (David Roy: *A Khasi Remembered: A collection of his writings on the Khasis* 38)

Khongphai has added that a woman in the Khasi society plays a vital role:

*... among the Khasis, racial claim through the father is of no importance... the Khasis reckon jait and kur from the woman so also they base everything in connection with their life on this basis. They founded their home in the woman, they founded their religion in the woman and they founded their raid (commune), the hima (state), also on the woman. (The Khasis 10-11)*

This shows that in the Khasi society, a woman plays an important role. She does not stay in the house only to look after the household chores, but she has other duties to perform as well. There is a kind of collaboration and co-operation between the Khasi man and the woman. For instance, in "Ka jaka U Khasi ha ka Pyrthei," David Roy says:

*Siang sla ka kynthei.*

*Knia te u Rangbah.*

*Sneng kraw ka kynthei.*

*Bishar khadar u rangbah.*

*Sumar iing sumar sem ka kynthei.*

*Bah ryntieh bah sum u rangbah.*

(David Roy: *A Khasi Remembered: A collection of his writings on the Khasis* 112-113)

In the chapter, "David Roy: A Biographical Sketch," Malcolm David Roy has translated the above as:

*The woman spreads the leaf.*

*The man performs the sacrifice.*

*The woman advices and counsels.*

*The man administers and passes judgements.*

*The woman keeps the home and hearth.*

*The man wields the bow and spear.*

(David Roy: *A Khasi Remembered: A collection of his writings on the Khasis* 26)

Women in the *Khasi* society are privileged to 'inherit the properties of their parents whether it is ancestral or self-acquired' (Khongphai 13). However, it is to be noted that *ka khadduh* is preferred to be the custodian of the ancestral property. This may be due to the fact that parents prefer their elder daughters to marry first and then 'not remain in the parental home upon marriage, though their new houses may be built close to that home.' (Cantlie 89) Because of this reason, *ka khadduh* does stay the longest at home and she becomes the 'keeper of the house for her old parents.' (ibid 29) Since she is the youngest, *ka khadduh* becomes the least suitable candidate to hold the important position of manager of the ancestral property. Due to her age, she is also considered to be one with the least experience. In order for *ka khadduh* to be able to manage the ancestral property in a proper manner, the *kni*'s or maternal uncles, or even the elder brothers and sisters become her advisors. In this fashion, *ka khadduh* cannot be considered as the 'absolute or sole owner of the family or clan property and that she could do whatever she likes with such property.' (Khongphai 17-18).

Sometimes, *ka khadduh*'s name may not appear in the legal documents stating that she is the custodian of the family property. However, this does not imply that she would not be able or not be allowed to manage the family property. It is automatically understood by all that *ka khadduh* will manage the property. She cannot by any means 'transfer or alienate such property without the consent of the members of the family, in case of family property, and members of the clan in case of clan property.' (Khongphai 17) The sale of a property cannot be done without the unanimous consent of the sisters along with the advice and prior knowledge of the maternal uncles or elder brothers or any senior members of the family or even the clan. The management of such property or properties fall on the maternal uncles or elder brothers or any senior members of the family or the clan. Therefore, *ka khadduh* is almost like a nominal head, as the powers of decision making are vested in the maternal uncles or elder brothers or any senior member of the family. The father however, is to be consulted in such matters.

When one studies the role of *ka khadduh*, one finds that she takes the role of a priestess. Due to this priestly office, she gets the role of manager of the ancestral property under the advice and guidance of her maternal uncles or elder brothers or any senior member of the family. The property bears the expenses for the religious ceremonies (*leh niam*). This

accounts for the privileged position she holds as she is bound to perform the religious duties of the family.

According to David Roy, *ka khadduh* 'is the receiver and custodian of the property as the steward of family worship and the watcher and main stay for the peace and the welfare of the living and the peace of the departed souls of the Khasi family (*ki kur*).' (David Roy: *A Khasi Remembered: A collection of his writings on the Khasis* 50)

In times of adversity and difficulty, the relatives or *kurs* can seek shelter from *ka khadduh*. The sisters and cousins also have the right to cultivate portions of land if nobody has cultivated it yet. But this becomes a right only at a time when they have difficulty in earning their livelihood. So in such cases, they have every right to ask for help from *ka iing khadduh* (House of the youngest daughter). They can also occupy an unoccupied portion of land. *Ka khadduh* cannot however, under such circumstances deprive them of this right.

*Ka iing khadduh* (House of the youngest daughter) is a place where religious ceremonies are performed. *Ka Khadduh* house is also called *ka iing seng* or *iing niam* which literally means a house of religious ceremonies, a place where all members of the family come to attend and witness *ka khadduh's* performance of the religious ceremonies. In this manner, the family is bound by *niam* or religion. The women become the holders of the spiritual affairs of the family.

*Ka khadduh* also cremates her mother and then finally deposits the bones in the final resting place, under the stone marked for the clan or *Mawbah*. The bones of the deceased family members are also deposited under the same stone marked for the clan by *ka khadduh*. In this regard, Gurdon states that this ceremony pertains to:

*The collection of the uncalcined bones and ashes of the deceased member of the clan and their bestowal in the mawbah, or great cinerarium of the clan, is without doubt the most important religious ceremony that the Khasis perform. That this ceremony is now but seldom celebrated, is due partly to the difficulty that exists in obtaining general agreement amongst the members of the clans, and partly to the considerable expense it entails. (The Khasis 140)*

Because of all these religious ceremonies and the expenses involved that *ka khadduh* has to bear, she therefore gets the position of a manager to manage the property, and an additional property is given to her so as to enable her to afford and meet the expenses of such religious ceremonies.

It is known in the *Khasi* society that in the original customary law, *ka khadduh* and the family are bound together and they are connected to *niam* or the *khasi* religion. *Ka khadduh*, therefore, performs her duties as a priestess.

However, many issues and problems cropped up when Christianity became wide spread among the *Khasis*. *Ka* Christian *khadduh* no longer performs her duties as a priestess. The *Khasis* who have converted to Christianity have a tendency to believe that they follow the Christian way of inheritance. In this manner, *ka khadduh* gets the 'unrestricted right of an heir under other systems of law.' (Cantlie 30) Due to this reason there is a lot of injustice with regards to the inheritance and ownership of property. The Christian faith has brought about many changes in the way people think, live and behave.

In his book, "Matriliny on the March: A Close Look at the Family System, Past and Present, of the *Khasis* in Meghalaya," Roland Kharkrang has voiced out many concerns among which, is the problem of a mix marriage. According to Kharkrang, *ka khadduh* is no longer the 'weakest'. Cantlie calls *ka khadduh* as "the custodian of the family property" or "not the most suitable manager of property" or even "often the least suitable as having the least experience." But now, Kharkrang believes that *ka khadduh* is no longer the 'weakest member'; she has attained a position "for all practical purposes the most powerful, and at times the most vicious and avaricious." (79) Pynshai Bor Syiemlieh has an opinion which fall on the same line as Kharkrang and that *ka khadduh* has become "too powerful and uncontrollable." (qtd. in Kharkrang 79)

According to Kharkrang, due to the 'rampant' cross-cultural marriages, many "crafty fortune seekers, the carefree and footloose adventurers, and even the penniless paupers dreamed the dream of dreams of landing with *ka khadduhs* ." (ibid 79) If *ka khadduh* falls prey to men who are opportunists, just so as to enable them to lead an easy, luxurious life and also to have control over the property, then there lies a great problem. Patricia Mukhim has a view that *Ka khadduh* may lose "control over property and hand over property to her husband." (qtd. in Kharkrang 16) Such *khadduhs* may even give up their surnames, customs and traditions so as to please and show her love and respect to her non-*Khasi* husband. The *khadduhs*' disregard of culture and customary practices has therefore become a matter of great concern. She shares the least of the burden of her parents, yet she has become powerful and

made to inherit all the wealth. The elder daughter, however, does not gain anything and has to make greater sacrifices for the family when it comes to sharing the burden of the parents. In the end, the eldest daughter does her duty well and is unpaid or not rewarded. It may even be a task that she has performed and yet not thanked for, since the belief is that it is a part of her duty. The elder daughter has to remain contented with her lot and she can only hope for blessings from her parents. In this connection, Mukhim has stated that "*ka khadduh* has been a bane of *Khasi* society" (qtd. in Kharkrang 80) *Ka khadduh* no longer performs her religious duties and her custodian position has changed to being the sole heir of the ancestral property. This is a "stroke of misfortune" for the *Khasis* (ibid) and this boon to the society has turned into a bane.

Thus we find that *ka khadduh* misuses her position for her own gain and selfish interest. But again, this point can be argued, as it may not be a case with all *Khasi* families. Some *Khasi* families have given a portion of the property even to their elder daughters and sons.

The debate about the inheritance of property still continues. One can thus only agree with David Roy as he speaks of the traditional position and role of the *Khasi* women in the following manner:

*Women amongst the Khasis enjoy a position of unusual dignity and importance. To students of the feminist movement, this District should afford an interesting field of study. For generations, Khasi women have been custodians of property in whose strength of life and character the men of their clans confide their life earnings and the hope of the peaceful resting of their souls. Their counsels carry weight with their male relatives, and with them these women share the burden of life but in spite of their responsibilities and duties they have lost nothing of the fascinating characteristics of their sex. (David Roy: A Khasi Remembered: A collection of his writings on the Khasis 43)*

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# 18

## The Women's Reservation Bill – Some Observations

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*H. Diengdoh*

The Women's Reservation Bill (WRB) first appeared as the 81st Amendment Bill in 1996, proposing to reserve 33% of seats in Parliament for women. Eyebrows were immediately raised by the more conservative male dominated parts of the country and the bill took on the shape of a women's issue. Debated largely in terms of women's rights, it is apparent that the largely male dominated bastions of the country are strongly against the proposal, making it increasingly clear that the questions thrown up by the timing of the Bill and the responses to it cannot be understood solely within the framework of women's rights.

India has over the years, seen a lot of debate over the issue of women's equality and rights. The issue of reservations for women had come up in the Constituent Assembly but had been rejected by women representatives, as it was felt to be unnecessary. The perception then was that democracy would, by its very nature, ensure the representation of all sections of society. It was also presumed, at the time, that proposing a reservation for women was demeaning and underestimated the capabilities of women. After almost thirty years, alarm bells started ringing when the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) reported that women's problems had remained unattended to and were not being given the importance they deserved. The CSWI therefore, unanimously recommended the establishment of statutory women's

panchayats. The Panchayat Acts of some states already had the provision for reservation of one or two seats for women, to be filled by nomination, if no woman was returned by election. This however, remained a token gesture and to resolve this anomaly, the CSWI recommended instead that the reserved seats be occupied by elected office-bearers of the women's panchayats proposed by the CSWI.

As was expected, there was a hue and cry over these recommendations, and the debates on the issue were no different from what we are familiar with. The arguments made in favour of reservation were mainly that:

The average political parties in the country were dominated by males, and the cultural and mental make-up of men in general, was such as was reluctant to accept women as equals, and would thus try to keep them out of active politics. This attitude made the reservation necessary.

Reservations, and the consequent mandatory increase in the number of women in parliament at any given time, would mould women into a strong cohesive lobby, as opposed to the paltry representation sans reservation which makes them a minority and likely to be overlooked.

There would be a change in the character of the debates and policies, should more women be inducted into parliament, as the focus of the debates would shift away from more male dominated issues into issues relating to women and children, so far not given the importance they deserved.

However, there were also arguments that were against the reservation policy which portrayed a flip side of the coin. These are briefed as follows:

- The reservation would contradict the very essence of the Principle of Equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution.
- That reservation for women would equate them to the backward classes of the country and that this was an anomaly, as women are not equal in social stature or composition throughout the country, or in other words, they are not a socially homogeneous group.
- Women's interests cannot be isolated from those of other economic, social and political strata's.
- Giving in to such demands would open a Pandora's Box and similar demands would pour in from other sections and



communities, causing unrest and in general, become a threat to National Integration.

The CSWI, buckling to this pressure, unanimously decided to uphold the stand taken by the Constituent Assembly and consequently back-tracked on the demand for the reservation of seats for women, in parliament and in state assemblies.

The issue of reservation for women came to the fore once again in the wake of the National Perspective Plan (NPP) 1988-2000, recommending a 30% reservation of seats for women in the Parishad and Zilla Parishad levels. In 1993, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution provided one-third reservation for women in these institutions nationwide. By the time of the General Elections in 1996, women's bodies demanded of all political parties, that the reservation policy for women be implemented faithfully, and that the apportioned seats be released for women candidates. The major political parties, while "supporting" this demand, apportioned only about 15% of their total tickets to women!

The Reservation Bill found its way into the Common Minimum Programme of the United Front government, which introduced it as the 81<sup>st</sup> Amendment Bill in 1996, proposing a 33% reservation for women in Parliament. As expected, the bill was not passed but was referred to a Joint Select Committee. An attempt was again made in 1998 and the 84<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bill was introduced by the BJP government.

The NDA government re-introduced the bill in the Lok Sabha in 1999. It moved the Bill again, amid pandemonium, in 2002. The Bill was introduced twice in Parliament in 2003 but in May that year, at an all-party meeting, the Speaker announced the deferring of the Bill. Protesting MPs rushed to the well of the House during Question Hour saying that they would never allow the Bill to be passed in the present form.

In 2004, the UPA government proposed that it would include it in the Common Minimum Programme, which said: "The UPA government will take the lead to introduce legislation for one-third reservations for women in Vidhan Sabhas and in the Lok Sabha."

In 2005, BJP announced complete support for the bill. Subsequently, it yielded to the objections of several others within the party, who stressed on quota within quota for women on caste basis.

In 2008, the government tabled the bill in the Rajya Sabha so that the legislation would not lapse.

In December 2009, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice and Personnel recommended the passage of the Bill.

The Bill was cleared by the Union Cabinet on February 25, 2010, and passed by the Rajya Sabha with an overwhelming majority on March 9, 2010. The bill is however, still lying unpassed by the Lok Sabha.

The question therefore arises as to why is it that even after seventeen years of its drafting, the Bill has still not seen the light of day? Why is it that a move to promote gender equality in decision-making bodies has not been implemented? Politicians camouflage their vested interests with the argument that the Bill would deny adequate representation for the backward sections of society. What they propose is a quota within a quota for certain classes. India ranks 109<sup>th</sup> in the world in the classification of women in National Parliaments, with 11% in the Lower House and 10.6 % in the Upper House.

This distressing state of affairs is an outcome of the continuous failure of women's welfare policies which fail to take off due to improper planning at the grassroot level. Corruption, nepotism and gender inequality threaten to erode the precious little that has been done for women's empowerment in this country.

India being by nature a patriarchal country, women have always been subjugated and forced to toe the line set for them by the male members. History bears witness to the atrocities meted out to womenfolk from the curse of *sati*, child marriage, ostracising of widows, temple dancers, illiteracy and prostitution. Little has changed today even in the so called modern society; where one can still see variations of these curses, albeit less pronounced, in the practice of child marriage, prostitution or trafficking in women for the sex trade, child labour, especially of girl children to work as maids in the houses of the more affluent, illiteracy and in extreme cases, *sati*! What has emerged as maybe an even bigger curse in recent times, is the practice of female foeticide. The male - female ratio in many parts of the country has dipped, thanks to this practice. Can a country that sees the girl child as a burden ever progress especially in terms of giving equal status to women? Where is the much touted equality of women in our country? The only logical way to set things straight will be to ensure empowerment of women and allow

women representatives in Parliament and State assemblies in adequate number, so as to be able to make a difference.

In India, the biggest hurdle in empowering women sadly lies in the fact that the majority of them are not educated to the extent that their male counterparts are, especially in the rural areas. The lack of education acts like a double-edged sword that perforce makes them ignorant and superstitious, and thus very pliable in the hands of scheming males. This also results in an imbalance in the education between the female populace in rural and urban locales and the fruits of knowledge are reaped by only a few fortunate women from elite families. Women's empowerment will go a long way in providing for the basic needs of womenfolk in the field of education and knowledge, and in removing this imbalance, besides making women self-reliant. This will greatly help in bringing new and fresh perspectives to the problems we face in India, especially on issues like crime against women.

The stalling tactics adopted by those in power, and the all too familiar blame game so well used for over a decade and a half now, has not weakened the resolve of the protagonists of the sections pushing for the passage of the Bill. Rather it has strengthened the resolve of all who wish to see our country emerge unscathed from this maelstrom of the politics of oppression. What remains to be seen is how further down into the abyss of uncertainty will the lack of vision in those who govern the country today pull this great country of ours, and how long will it then take for light to shine through the dark clouds that have been allowed to gather in the centuries of apathy towards the genuine rights of womenfolk.

It is widely accepted the world over that the socio-economic condition of women will improve only if they are also a part of the governing process. It is globally believed that women must be given education, due right, power to speak, freedom of expression, health and equality. In spite of this realisation, gender sensitivity in administration is still struggling to get a foothold because of the unfounded fear that women might surpass men in all spheres and also make incursions into the political arena, which is largely considered to be a male domain.

Those who oppose the Bill for any reason, vested or otherwise, should be made to arrive at a consensus in the interest of the nation, as only a nation which has empowered its women to be a part of all forms of governance, can achieve true liberation and economic success. In the final analysis, India can only shine with the glory that she deserves when

the shackles of oppression are shattered and this can come about only by enacting the Women's Reservation Bill.

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10. <http://news.oneindia.in/topic/women-reservation-bill>

# 19

## Political Participation and Empowerment of Women in Meghalaya

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*M.P.R Lyngdoh*

Political participation and political empowerment of women in Meghalaya has for long, been a catchphrase of the government, and of the many women organizations and NGO's in the state. Women are yet to fully realize and understand what political participation and political empowerment really means. Political 'participation' of women implies their right to vote, to be given tickets to contest for elections, to campaign, to be members of political parties, including women's wings, to hold key posts in the parties and other political activities. On the other hand, 'empowerment' refers to the delegation of lawful power or authority that enables an individual to act on his/her own. In the context of women, empowerment is giving this lawful right to them in matters of administration or in the political, social, educational, and legal fields; allowing them to be at par with men. Thus, political 'empowerment' of women is to grant them an opportunity to be part of the decision making process and to allow sharing of power, by integrating them into the political set up.

Meghalaya follows a matrilineal system where lineage is traced from the mother, and children adopt the title of the mother's clan. Women here have social and economic freedom, yet traditionally, politics and administration are the domains of men. In the traditional Khasi political set up, women are not allowed to attend *Dorbars* or village

council meetings, and village administration is always headed by men. However, of late, the spread of education has brought about a transformation in the Khasi society. Presently, some local *Dorbars*, mainly those of the urban areas like Laitumkhrah, Lachumiere, Nongrim Hills and others, have included women as members of the executive committees; and in many localities, women do attend the general meetings of the *Dorbar*.

Since time immemorial, the participation of women in these traditional bodies has been relegated to the background. The reason being the fact that, our forefathers felt that women had more important roles and duties to perform at the household levels and that they were not to be burdened further. Hence, the role that women played with regards to these traditional bodies was more of a moral force rather than an active participation. A similar situation is observed in the Garo hills, where there too, women can neither take part in village administration nor can they become village headmen; the *Nokma*, *Laskar* and *Sardar* who are the administrators of justice, are all men.

There are however, traditions indicating that, at an earlier time, women did participate in the administration and political matters of the village. Dr. H. Lyngdoh in his book entitled, *Ka Niam Khasi*, mentioned that Lalitaditya, the king of Kashmir who invaded the early Jaintia kingdom, which he called "Stri Rajya", was greatly repulsed when he discovered that it was a women's kingdom. Further, in the *hima* or state of Nongsohphoh or Nobosohphoh, mention is made of a female ruler named ka Lar who became the ruler in the absence of a male heir. Another tradition mentioned by Dr. H. Barih in his book entitled, *The History and Culture of the Khasi*, indicates that Maharam Syiemship also had a female ruler, ka Wan Rani. She is told to have taken initiatives to keep the solidarity of the State, at a time when it was brewing with internal problems. Wan Rani was noted for her remarkable contributions towards the progress of trade, commerce and industry. The story of yet another famous female ruler, ka Syiem Latympang is also well known. She was a wise and powerful ruler of a small state of Manar in Jaintia Hills and settled at a place called Borato. Ka law Saring in the Raid Iapngar of the Bhoi area was yet another female ruler mentioned. According to customary laws, women were debarred from becoming rulers except in the absence of a legitimate male heir. Probably, this might have been the situation which compelled the *hima* or states to install female rulers. The

existence of female rulers in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya proved that, at one point of time, there were women who did participate in political affairs and administration.

Khasi, Jaintia and Garo societies were however transformed during the pre- independence and post- independence period. With administration taking on new forms, coupled with the spread of education, women became more politically conscious. Women in Meghalaya have indeed made their presence felt in the fields of professional studies, business and trade, civil services and other spheres. However, politics is still considered a man's domain, and very few women have ventured into electoral politics. To many, traditional family roles take precedence over active politics. Further, women are yet to realize that democracy requires participatory roles of both men and women. In this regard therefore, women need encouragement and support so that their role is not restricted to that of a voter only, but that they may also become effective policy framers.

It may be recalled that women played a very significant role in the national movement. Mahatma Gandhi remarked that when the history of India's independence comes to light, the sacrifices made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. Jawaharlal Nehru also narrated that when the men were imprisoned, it was the women who took the leadership and continued the struggle for freedom; their participation took not only the British, but also their own menfolk by surprise. Khasi women also played a very important role in the resistance movement against the British under the leadership of Tirot Sing, which took place between 1829 and 1833; women rendered significant help and support to the men involved in that struggle. During the Jaintia rebellion or the Jaintia War of Liberation (1860-1862) under Kiang Nangbah, it was said that his mother was a guide and a source of inspiration for the great martyr.

With regards to the hill state movement, women were seen to have actively participated in propagating the movement, and taking part in the programmes of the movement like public meetings, procession, and *hartals*, until the separate State of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam; first, as an autonomous state in 1970 and as a full-fledged state on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, 1972. In the ensuing elections, women came out in large numbers to exercise their franchise. They took part in political activities like campaigning during elections to mobilize and influence voters, and held important and key posts in the political parties. Women political

workers also took active part in the Women's wings of their respective political parties. Though women participated in these political activities, very few came forward to join the electoral fray; as such, they were deprived of being involved in the policy making bodies.

During the pre-independence period, women were given the right to vote by the Government of India Act, 1935. Although this right was restricted and limited, the Act provided for the representation of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly by means of 'seat reservation' from the Shillong Constituency. This seat was known as the "Shillong Women Seat". The Act also permitted women to contest for the general seat. Consequently, in the 1937 assembly elections, two women contested the Shillong 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 Assam Legislative Assembly. Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was inducted into the Muhammad Saadulla's ministry from the year 1939 to 1941 and again from 1942 till 1945, making her the first lady in the North East to become a minister. The 1946 Assembly elections witnessed five women contestants, namely B. Khongmen, T.W. Shadap, Berlina Diengdoh, Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh and Padma Kumari Gohain. From these, Mrs B. Khongmen contested from the Congress while the other four contested as independent candidates; Padma Kumari Gohain contested from the general seat and the others from the Shillong women seat. In this election however, Mrs. B. Khongmen was the successful candidate.

The first general elections of free India was held in 1952. The Shillong Constituency became a general seat and it was no longer reserved as "Shillong women seat". Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh and Manorama Mehta were the two ladies who contested the Shillong seat against the successful candidate, Mr J.J.M. Nichols Roy of the Congress. During this period, there were five constituencies in the Khasi Jaintia Hills, namely, Shillong, Jowai, Nongstoin, Nongpoh and Sohra while there were four in the Garo Hills - Tura, Baghmara, Phulbari and Dainadhubi. The first parliamentary elections to the Lok Sabha was also held in the year 1952 in which Mrs B. Khongmen, Mr. Wilson Reade and Mr. L.L.D. Basan contested from the autonomous district constituencies of the then undivided Assam. Mrs. B. Khongmen was elected, thus making her the first and only woman from Assam in the Lok Sabha and the first woman from the Khasi Jaintia and Garo hills to have represented the



people in the Lok Sabha. In 1957, she returned to state politics as a congress candidate, but was defeated. For decades, only men have been elected to both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. The 1994 Lok Sabha elections witnessed another woman candidate, Smt. Elizabeth Laitphlang, who was however defeated.

When Meghalaya was created as an autonomous State in 1970, Smt. Maysalin War along with Mr J.S. Momin were nominated to the Provincial Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. After the creation of the full statehood in 1972, a number of women came forward to contest in the first elections to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Smt. Percylina Marak was the only woman who was elected from Garo Hills. In the 1978 Assembly elections, only Smt Miriam Shira from Garo Hills was elected from among the women candidates. In the 1983 Assembly elections, all women candidates were defeated and the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly was an all male Assembly. The next elections in the year 1988 witnessed Maysalin War, representing Mawthengkut constituency, as the only successful woman candidate, and she was included in the Congress led ministry. Similarly, the 1993 assembly elections also had only one successful woman candidate-Smt. Roshan Warjri who was elected from Mawkhar Constituency. There was however, an improvement in the 1998 Assembly elections, in which three women legislators, Maysalin War, Roshan Warjri and Deborah Marak emerged successful. The Assembly elections of 2009 had two successful women candidates, Irin Lyngdoh and Deborah Marak representing Pariong Constituency and Rongrenggiri constituency respectively. Smt. Jopsimon Phanbuh contested in the Bye election of the 22 - Laban Constituency in the year 2003, a seat fallen vacant due to the death of her husband, Shri Thranghok Rangad. Yet, inspite of having won the Bye Election, she did not contest again in the next assembly elections. The 2008 Assembly elections again witnessed a number of women candidates, but only Ampareen M. Lyngdoh contesting from a UDP ticket, managed to be successful. After resigning from the UDP, she again contested in the 2009 Bye Election from a congress ticket and won by an even bigger margin. With regards to the District Councils, the representation of women in the three District Councils from the year 1952 to 2009 is negligible. However three women candidates, namely Irin Lyngdoh, Grace M. Kharpuri and Teilinia Thangkiew contested and won the 2009 District Council elections. At present, there are three women councilors in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC). Earlier, in the

year 1972, District Council elections had two women candidates namely, E. Syiem and Brosila Lamin, who both emerged victorious.

Considering the country as a whole, the representation of women either in the local state bodies or the Parliament, is dismal. In the Lok Sabha elections between 1952 and 1996, the percentage of women contestants remained virtually stagnant at 3.2 per cent. The exception was in 1957, (the second general elections), where their percentage was 4.4 per cent. The situation has not shown much improvement even in the present day. For instance, with reference to the Lok Sabha, the representation of women is only 10.8 per cent in 2009. This indicates that in the 15th Lok Sabha, there were only 59 female members in a house of 545 members, while in the Rajya Sabha there were only 24 female members in a house of 250 members.

Reservation is one of the instruments of political empowerment since through this, the representation of women is guaranteed and their political participation ensured. The government has made an effort to politically empower women. The Reservation Bill providing 33% reservation of Assembly and Parliament seats for women was introduced in the Parliament intending to give women one- third share in the decision making bodies, from the Panchayat level to the level of the Parliament. In 1996, the Women's Reservation Bill was introduced as the 81<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill. It was reintroduced as the 84<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill in 1998 and again in 1999. In 2002, the Bill failed to get the clearance of the House. In 2003, the Bill was introduced twice in Parliament. The Bill was tabled in the Rajya Sabha in the year 2008 in order to save it from getting lapsed. In 2010, the Cabinet cleared the Bill and it was passed by the Rajya Sabha on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, one day before the celebration of the International Women's Day. The Bill is however, yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha.

The journey of the Women's Reservation Bill from 1996 till date has indeed been far stretched. Women of our country are still eagerly awaiting the 33% reservation and are keen to witness the passing of the Bill in the Lok Sabha; meanwhile, the struggle continues. With the passing of the Bill, it is hoped that more women would be encouraged to participate in active politics. It is worth mentioning that under the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act, reservation for women has become a reality in the Panchayats, the grassroot institutions, Municipalities and civic bodies. This reservation has paved the way for the participation of women in the

decision making bodies at the local levels, without which, women would not have been elected to these bodies. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, 1992, excludes Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, District Council areas of Manipur and the areas covered by the Gorkha Hill Council in Darjeeling District of West Bengal. The reason for this being the fact that these areas have a traditional system of administration (similar to that of the Panchayats) and therefore require careful treatment, alongwith the least amount of disquietude. It may be noted that Article 243 (4) (b) provides that, the Parliament by law, may extend the provision of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act to the fifth Scheduled areas and the sixth Scheduled districts and regions. The question to wrangle with is therefore, how to redefine, remodel the local institutions and to instill in them the spirit of Panchayati Raj so as to allow the people at the grass root levels to avail of the many benefits.

It is a surprise to many that the matrilineal society of Meghalaya could produce but a few women politicians. The active and dynamic participation of women in politics is essential and therefore calls for encouragement. There is a need to build leadership among women who would work for the development and upliftment of the society in general, and women in particular. The much needed impetus for women to emerge out of their comfort zones and contest in the local bodies, state assemblies and parliament, would come from education and awareness, self-confidence building and self empowerment. The representation of women in all decision making bodies of the State and Central Governments, so as to enable them to speak for themselves, will definitely bring a significant change in the state and the country as a whole. Citizens of the country would like to see educated women of ability and integrity, who are not only enlightened in their outlook, but also committed to the welfare of the state and the country, join electoral politics and actively participate in the decision making bodies at all levels. Only then, would we be able to claim that our democracy is complete; where our women are empowered and can significantly contribute towards the progress and development of our country.

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## Women's Political Participation in Meghalaya Legislative Assembly From 1972- 2008

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*Vinery R. Solomon  
Amina Marbaniang*

Women's participation and representation in politics is one of the first steps towards women's empowerment and emancipation.<sup>1</sup> Pandit Nehru had clearly visualized that a country can develop only when women have a full chance to play their part in public life: "when women move forward, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves"<sup>2</sup>, are the words delivered by him about empowerment of women for the development of the country.

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. Recognising the growing importance of political empowerment for women, the UN has been organizing several conferences on the subject. However, global

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1. Gupta, Surojit Sen (2006), *Role of Khasi women in political and administrative system- Tradition to Modernity* in A. Kumar Ray, R. Prasad Athparia (ed.). *Women and changing power structure in North East India*. New Delhi: Om Publications.
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awareness concerning the issue came to the forefront during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995; its emphasis being, 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.<sup>3</sup>

In India, though the history of women's entry into politics can be traced as far back as during India's struggle for freedom, yet a comparative analysis of women's political participation in India today reveals that they are still under represented and marginalized in politics. An analysis of all the 15 Lok Sabhas shows an appalling figure of their representation, which is less than 7 percent since Independence. At present, there is only 10.83 percent of women representation in the Lok Sabha and 10.61 percent in the Rajya Sabha. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union<sup>4</sup>, India lags behind its neighbours Pakistan and Nepal when it comes to women's participation in politics at the national level. However, at the local level, the participation of women in politics has improved since the passing of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts in the year 1993, which provide for 33 percent reservation of seats for women in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act however, excludes Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and District Council areas of Manipur and the areas covered by the Gorkha Hill Council in Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The reason is that, these areas have their own traditional systems similar to that of the Panchayati Raj, which requires careful treatment and must not be disturbed. It may be noted that women generally, have no roles in these traditional institutions.<sup>5</sup>

With regards to Meghalaya, where people follow the Matrilineal System, women are thought to be in a better position than men. However, this is only a myth. Women in Meghalaya are being under-

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3. UN Women, [www.un.org/women\\_watch/daw/beijing/platform/](http://www.un.org/women_watch/daw/beijing/platform/)

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

5. Lyngdoh, M.P.R (2006), "Political participation of women in Meghalaya- from Tradition to Modernity" in A. Kumar Ray, R. Prasad Athparia (ed.). Women and changing power structure in North East India. New Delhi: Om publications.

represented, not only in the Legislative Assembly and District Councils, but also in the Local *Dorbars* as well. In the Matrilineal system, the child adopts 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 women from participation in the political and administrative affairs, areas which are considered to be predominantly, a man's domain. Traditionally, in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills women are not allowed to attend the *Dorbar* or the village council. In the Garo Hills too, women are not allowed to take part in Village administration.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the practice of not having women in *dorbars* is still prevalent even today. It is only in a few localities of Shillong that some margin of participation by women at the *dorbar* is allowed. In fact it is still unthought-of for a woman to contest for the post of 'Headman' in the Khasi society.

The History of women's participation in electoral politics in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills can be traced as far back as the British rule in India, in which the Government of India Act 1935 gave women the right to vote. The Act has made special provisions for the representation of women in the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Shillong constituency, which was a reserved seat, besides permitting them to contest from other seats. Hence, in 1937, two women contested from the Reserved Constituency, Mrs. Berlina Diengdoh and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. The latter was declared elected and it was for the first time that a woman became a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly. Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was inducted into the Muhammad Saidullah's Ministry twice in 1939-1941 and again from 1942-1945. She was the first woman in the North East to become a Minister. In the 1946 Assembly election, four women contested the elections for the reserved seat. They were B. Khongmen, T.W. Shadap, Berlina Diengdoh and Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. Only B. Khongmen was elected and made Deputy Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1952.

After Independence, the reservation of seat for women was removed and in 1952, out of the eleven candidates there was only one woman who contested for the Assam Legislative Assembly.<sup>7</sup> Mavis Dunn

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6. Lyngdoh, M.P.R (2006), "Political participation of women in Meghalaya- from Tradition to Modernity" in A. Kumar Ray, R. Prasad Athparia (ed.). *Women and changing power structure in North East India*. New Delhi: Om publications.
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Lyngdoh contested but lost to J.J.M. Nichols Roy of the I.N.C. The first parliamentary election to the Lok Sabha was held in 1952. Bonnilly Khongmen of the INC defeated two of her male rivals, Wilson Reade and L.L.D. Basan, and she became the first and the only woman representative from Assam to the Lok Sabha in 1952. In the next Lok Sabha elections in 1957, no women candidates contested and in the same year, Mrs B. Khongmen returned to State politics to contest in the Assembly elections but was defeated. In later years i.e. from 1962 up to 1969, no women contested from the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills, either in the Lok Sabha elections or in the elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly.

In 1970, Meghalaya came into existence as an autonomous State wherein two women found a place in the Provincial Legislative Assembly via nomination. These members were Maysalin War and Josephine Momin. Since the creation of a full-fledged State in 1972, the history of women's participation in the Assembly elections has been very insignificant. In the first election to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly in 1972, nine women contested out of a total 198 candidates. They were Silverine Swer, Muriel Dunn, P.S. Marbaniang, Maysalin War, Louisiana Brosila Lamin and Resida Sohtun from the Khasi hills and Miriam D. Shira, Percylina Marak and H.B. Sangma from Garo Hills. Out of these women contestants, only Percylina Marak from the Garo Hills came out successful. In the 1978 Assembly elections, there were seven women contestants out of 262. They were Neena Rynjah, Maysalin War, Drosila Mukhim and Usha Bhattacharjee who contested from the Khasi hills and Miriam D. Shira, Percylina Marak and Friedna Marak from Garo Hills. Only Miriam D. Shira from the Garo Hills proved successful. In 1983, there were eight women contestants out of 317. They were Ivoryna Shylla, Tiplut Nongbri, Naramai Langstieh, Evandalyne Massar, Maya R. Kyndiah, Louisiana Brosila Lamin and Maysalin War from Khasi Hills and Miriam D. Shira from Garo Hills. In this election, no woman was elected to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. In 1988, there were only three women contestants out of a total 271 candidates. They were Maysalin War, Miriam D. Shira and Fridina K. Marak. In this election, two women out of three were successful; they were Maysalin War and Miriam D. Shira. This was the first time, since the attainment of Statehood that there were two women legislators in the Assembly. In the 1993 elections, seven women contested out of 290 candidates. The names of these contestants were Ivoryna Shylla, Maya R. Kyndiah, Roshan Warjri, J.



Kurbah, Maysalin War, Miriam D. Shira and E. Shira, out of which, only Roshan Warjri won the election. In 1998, the number of women contestants was 15 out of 308 candidates, which was a record number of women contestants compared to previous elections. They were Lucia Malngiang, Margaret Rose Mawlong, Naramai Langstieh, Meena Kharkongor, Maya R. Kyndiah, Roshan Warjri, Amanda Pathaw, Victory Kharsyntiew, Simil Gury Kharhujon, Jahannara B. Kharbhih, Queentina Diengdoh, Maysalin War, Deborah C. Marak, Miriam D. Shira and Bijeta Daring. For the first time in the history of electoral politics in Meghalaya, three women were voted to power and this record has not been broken until today. The three elected women were Roshan Warjri, Maysalin War and Debora C. Marak. In 2003, the number of women contestants was fourteen out of 333. They were Marina Dkhar, Rita M. V. Lyngdoh, Phidalia Toi, Larisha Kurkalang, Maya R. Kyndiah, Amanda Pathaw, Sypai Khonglah, Veronica Marbaniang, Irin Lyngdoh, Maysalin War, Deborah C. Marak, Bindu Momin, Anilla D. Shira and Stella Marie A. Sangma. Only two women were elected namely, Irin Lyngdoh and Deborah C. Marak. With the untimely demise of Mr T.H. Rangad, the sitting MLA from Laban Constituency, a bye-election was held in 2004. In this election, his widow Jopsimon Phanbuh contested and won the seat. Thus, the number of women legislators rose to three in the house of sixty. In the last election held in 2008, 21 women contested out of 338 candidates, which is the highest number of women contestants since 1972. They were Rita M.V. Lyngdoh, Dr B. Wahlang, Aidalis Ranee, Pretty Kharpyngrope, Ampareen Lyngdoh, Meristella Wahlang, Irene P. Hujon, Celestina Lamin, Manosha Warjri, Christina Majaw, Irin Lyngdoh, Maysalin War, Mehallin S. Marak, Jahannara B. Kharbhih, Arlene N. Sangma, Sophie B. Marak, Lenita M. Sangma, Gentilla R. Marak, Florence Sangma, Deborah C. Marak and Seriminda D. Marak. Yet, in spite of the highest number of contestants, only Ampareen Lyngdoh was elected. However, due to her resignation shortly after the elections, a bye- election was held in 2009. It is interesting to note that in this bye-election the same woman candidate, Ampareen Lyngdoh contested from another party and still won the elections. The following are the number of Women candidates put up by Political parties in the Assembly elections from 1972-2008:

**Table 20.1** 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			5		3			4	4	21
Total no of women put up by parties so far	19	6	4	4	1	1	9	1	4	5	1	4	25	84

Source: Information book on Meghalaya Elections from 1972- 2009 published by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer Meghalaya

Even though the State of Meghalaya has reached its 40<sup>th</sup> year of existence, the number of women participating in active politics is still very less. In fact, the percentage of women who contested in the Assembly elections was never more than 7 percent at any point of time. The number of women who were elected was also very insignificant. At present, only one seat out of sixty in the State Legislative Assembly is occupied by a woman.

Women in Meghalaya are by and large politically passive, though they may be socially active. Women do actively participate in National and Regional political parties. Some of them hold important positions in the women's wings of different political parties, yet very few contest in the elections. This could either be due to the tradition of the society, one in which women are not encouraged to participate and decide on political affairs, or due to the apathetic attitude of political parties. Thus, society and political parties have a great role to play in this regard, the former, in removing the traditional barriers, and the latter, in giving tickets to women to enter the electoral fray. Some concrete suggestions have been made in order to stimulate political participation and political empowerment of women in Meghalaya. Such suggestions include value education, reservation of seats at all levels of political decision-making, pro-active roles of political parties in providing tickets to women and giving women important positions in decision making bodies. Further, it is also essential that women develop a positive attitude towards politics, which should be coupled with a pro-active role of the government in creating a positive social and political environment in the state.

A statistical analysis of the percentage of women voters shows that their number is fairly consistent over the last elections that have been held. Yet, it does not seem to have had a substantial impact on how many women voters are actually voted into office. The lack of women's participation in politics may be surmised on reasons other than the number of women voters.

The following table 20.2 indicates the Male- Female Ratio of poll percentage from 1972-2008.

**Table 20.2 Poll Percentage of Male- Female Ratio from 1972-2008**

Sl. No	Election Year	Male	Female	Total
1	1972	28.26	23.32	51.58
2	1978	35.55	31.63	67.18
3	1983	37.68	34.90	72.58
4	1988	39.56	37.14	76.70
5	1993	40.71	38.82	79.53
6	1998	37.37	37.14	74.51
7	2003	34.27	34.99	69.26
8	2008	44.16	44.88	89.04

**Source:** Information book on Meghalaya Elections from 1972- 2009 published by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer Meghalaya

Thus to conclude, when one compares the political participation of women at all levels in the country, one may find that women in Meghalaya lag much behind. This is due to the fact that while in other parts of the country, women have a 33 percent reservation in the Panchayats and Municipal bodies, there is no such reservation for women in Meghalaya, neither in the District Councils nor Local bodies. Introduced in 1996, the aim of the Women's Reservation Bill is to reserve 33 percent of seats in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for women. The passing of the bill in the Rajya Sabha on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2010, has been hailed as a historic and great step in the empowerment of women. It provides some kind of hope that women will get a significant representation in the Parliament, as well as State Legislative Assemblies. Though introduced in Parliament several times since, as of August 2012, this bill has not yet been voted in the Lok Sabha, due to lack of political consensus. Some political parties have always opposed this Bill on various grounds. Although, it is perceived that the main fear of such parties is that their male leaders would not get a chance to fight in the elections, should 33 percent of seats be reserved for women. The Bill has also been opposed by politicians from the socially and economically backward classes. Their main argument being that, reservation would only help women of the elitist groups and rich classes gain seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. They fear that should this happen, it would 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 about 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. ANHAD believes that there should be no discrimination between men and women. They also pointed out that reservation for women in Panchayats and local bodies have 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 communities 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, while the same apprehensions have been raised by many regarding the bill, it is interesting to note that a majority of the people interviewed, have reacted positively towards women's participation in politics. Many have felt that more women participants would not only generate more influence but would also bring about new perspectives in policy and decision making, leading therefore, to a much needed change and development.

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## Status and Changing Power Structure of Women in Meghalaya

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*Ibakitbok S. Kharkongor*

The term 'status' is used to refer to some of the capacities which could be legally enforced, and also to the limitations of the people or their relative superiority and inferiority. Since 1936, this term has undergone radical changes. It has now come to be a synonym for any 'position in the social system.' According to Linton, a 'status' is marked off by the fact that distinctive beliefs about, and expectations for social actors are organized around it. He defined 'status' as the "polar position... in pattern of reciprocal behavior," and a 'polar position' is that which consists of rights, duties and a role as a dynamic aspect of status.

Women's status can be interpreted as the degree of women's access to and control over material resources which include food, income, land and other forms of wealth. It also refers to the access and control over social resources like knowledge, power and prestige within the family, community and society at large. The National Committee on the status of women in India defined 'status' as, the position in a social system or sub-system which is distinguishable from and at the same time, related to other positions through its designated rights and obligations.

In recent times, the subject has especially become more important because of the growing acknowledgement that women can play an equally important, if not a more important role in the social, economic and political fields. In fact the society's stability can be maintained only if

men and women play complementary roles with equally important statuses in their own spheres of activities.

Women in the Khasi society enjoy a better position than their counterparts from other parts of the country, where the roles assigned to women have restricted their mobility. For instance, in Hindu tradition, though women have been considered to be the primary source of strength as testified in mythology and oral history and that theoretically, they have a place of honour in the society, in practice, however, prejudices stand in the way of treating them as equals with men. Though the position of Khasi women is relatively better, nevertheless, they suffer from certain social disabilities as would be clear in the ensuing discussion.

### **Socio-Economic status**

The Khasi matrilineal system has shown a dynamic, but often contradictory process of power transformation. Things have gone in diverse directions - sometimes to alternative trajectories, sometimes challenging and sometimes opposing the dominant institution of matriliney. Perhaps in few societies are women as fortunate as the Khasi women. In the traditional Khasi society, the role of the woman is not confined only to the house, for she participates freely in socio-cultural functions. Women do not have problems of dowry, *purdah* system, bride burning, female foeticide and others; rather they enjoy privileges and play their distinctive roles in various spheres of life. As such they have a distinctively greater responsibility than the women of other societies. The Khasi society undoubtedly allows a higher place to women. They have special privileges and responsibilities in their houses. Their rights over house and property are sanctified by customs and religious traditions. Kinship obligations of the women place extra responsibility upon her thus, enhancing her status.

In Meghalaya, women are responsible for looking after their families and their parents. The matrilineal system of descent and inheritance is still a predominant feature of the Khasi society, where ancestral property is transferred through the female. Landownership definitely heightened the status of women in the family, as well as in society. According to Khasi and Jaintia customs, usually *ka khadduh* or the youngest daughter gets the major share of the property. She however, is not the heiress of the ancestral property, but the custodian or keeper of both movable and immovable property of the ancestors. Among the Khasis, the family grows in the female line. That is, matrilineal descents affiliate an individual



to a group consisting exclusively of relations of a mother. Kinship is traced through the maternal side (*ki kur ki jait*) and not through the paternal side (*ki kha ki man*). The first ancestress is known as *ka iawbei*, and her brother who is the first ancestral, is called *u suidnia*. The first husband of the ancestress is called *u thawlang*. The first ancestress or the mother and her offsprings belong to the same *ing* (her family) and her surname is handed down to progeny. A clan springs forth from a woman; this has characterized the position of women in Khasi society. The children, grand children and great grand children are referred to as children of one womb (*kpoh*). The pertinent point is that the Khasis have great reverence for the female progenitor.

The mother plays an important role in the family. She enjoys a divine position as the woman of the house and is often considered as "*ka blei ing*" meaning the *goddess* or guardian of the house. The name suggests not only the moral attributes of virtue, purity and goodness usually ascribed to women, but also her role in the maintenance of the continuity and the growth of her family, her sub-clan (*kpoh*) and her clan (*kur*).

While women are central to the family in Khasi ideology, they need to be protected and guarded by men. Just as the woman's role in reproduction and nurturance favours the mother, a man's physiological strength, according to the Khasi, gives him authority over women. The saying 'man has twelve strengths' (*u rangbah khadar bor*) highlights man's superior power and confers on him the role of the protector and the provider (*U nongbsa nongbtiah*) vis-à-vis the woman who is the nurturer and the holder (*ka nongkhat ka nonglum*).

It is fortunate that the Khasi women of Meghalaya enjoy a higher status compared to women of other states in the Indian Union. They enjoy this position because of the egalitarian ethos of their society. In fact, no restriction is imposed on women's mobility, food habits and widow remarriage in the Khasi society. Khasi women also have the freedom to choose their husbands. The practice of dowry, which has been an acute problem of most women across the country, is absent amongst the Khasis. Further, the Khasi society is free from many social restraints of the larger Indian society. There is no caste system, untouchability and social inequality. All this reveals that khasi women have a distinctly higher position and status than the women of other societies.

However, patriarchal values spread shadows over the institution of matriliney. Therefore, though in principle, female ultimo geniture is followed

in the case of inheritance of ancestral property (*ka Nongtymmen*), the youngest daughter (*ka khadduh*), is only the custodian and cannot dispose or will away the property so inherited. Being the youngest, she is invariably treated by her brothers and sisters as someone lacking in experience. Further, she has little say in the control and management of the property that she inherits; it is the mother's brother who enjoys these privileges.

The maternal uncle does the actual management of the ancestral property, while the clan plays the dominant role in matters of disposal. The mother, or after her death, her daughters before or after their marriage, cannot dispose of the land by herself/themselves without the approval and consent of the uncles or brothers constituting the *dorbar kur* of the clan, or the branch of the clan, in case of undivided land; in case of land held by the family, a mother with an uncle or a brother living in her house, or alone, can apportion it among her children. Thus, the remote male control over management and disposal of property virtually robs off the rights of women.

It has to be reckoned that sisters other than the youngest, though having no direct claim to inheritance, still have remote and potential right of inheritance. The youngest sister cannot alienate or dispose of the ancestral house without the consent of her sisters. If the youngest daughter of the family dies before coming into inheritance, the youngest sister acquires the right of inheritance and so on. Failing sisters, inheritance would pass on to the sister's youngest daughter, who then will continue the line of succession through her youngest daughter. If there be no sister's daughters, the line of succession shall revert to the mother's sisters.

The *khadduh* "holds" the "religion" (*ka kynthei ka bat niam*), for she is held responsible for the timely execution of family rituals. Her house is called "*Ka ing seng*", and it is here that the members of the family assemble to witness her performance of the family ceremonies. She makes preparations for the various religious ceremonies but for this, she has to seek the assistance of the male matrikin. It is her maternal uncle or brother who performs the actual rituals; priesthood is thus a male vocation among the Khasis. Hence, even in the domestic sphere, which is acknowledged as the sphere in which women are central, men control the levers of power and decision-making. The rights and privileges of women in the Khasi matriline appear to be mere burdensome duties and responsibilities.

Among the Christian Khasis, there is not a single ordained woman pastor. As in traditional times, women still take a secondary role while men lead in worship. This does not mean that women do not speak out on religious topics. They do, but only on a certain context, never as pastors or priests.

Khasi women organizations confine their roles to cultural and social spheres such as upliftment of society and women, foreigners' issues, unemployment, social evils which though have a lot of political dimensions, are not political activities per se. None of these organizations take part in the decision-making and policy-making process.

The Garo society of Meghalaya represents another variant of matrilineal society. Here too, descent is traced through the mother only. The institution of *Mahari* (Maternal Uncle) plays a key role in the Garo society. But Garo customary law makes it imperative that property has to be retained by the mother's clan. All property belongs to the woman, remains with her clan and is passed on from mother to daughter. Sons do not receive any part of the property. Property is shared among the sisters of the family. Therefore, a daughter-less family usually adopts a girl from the motherhood for the inheritance of property. Inheritances of property by Garo women have enabled them to achieve more status in the family and society while, at the same time, they are deprived of decision-making powers in the family. Men folk of the family as well as the *Mahari* are the decision makers on behalf of women. Even in matters of marriage, the decision taken by the men folk is final. Like the Khasis, on the day of marriage, a Garo man leaves his mother's house and goes to his wife's, to form a new family. His children also take their mother's clan name.

The economic position and economic status of women in any society is influenced by the extent of their involvement in income generating activities outside the household. But in Meghalaya, the role of women is more often linked to services which rarely cater to the market. Child-bearing and child-rearing, besides household maintenance (cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.), affect the time and mobility of women in their attempts to seek employment, education and health care. Increasing women productivity affects their status and survival in the family, as well as in the society. Raising a female's earning power is therefore crucial in increasing the effective demand for education, health and family planning services, which, consecutively, are necessary for improving the status of women.

Trading was primarily a male occupation, with men walking long distances and staying away from home for days, trading in valuables like gold, silver, silk, iron, textiles, garments and diverse items of consumption. Women however, engage in a wider variety of occupations, usually in the unorganized sector and at the lower rungs of the ladder. They take part in trade, though only at a smaller scale, trading in items of less economic importance. Lack of organization and unionization, makes their bargaining position very weak.

A related factor that has had a more powerful influence in propelling women into trade, especially in more recent times, is perhaps, their poor access to land. In an agrarian economy, ownership of and access to land are vital for the economic security of a household. But unfortunately, some women have been forced to take up trade, as their cultivable lands and hills have been requisitioned by the government, for purposes like construction of dams, roads *etc.* This factor helps explain women's economic position, including the employment avenues available to them. In many households, diminished access to land resulted in a multiplicity of occupations to supplement the decreasing family income. In the absence of land, and faced with shrinking employment opportunities in agriculture, many women have turned to trade as an alternative source of livelihood.

While there are low-skilled jobs such as carpentry, masonry, furniture making, motor repairing, and driving available to men, the avenues for women are highly restricted. This means that women either have to reconcile themselves to casual wage-labor, which is riddled with uncertainties, or they have to create their own employment opportunities in areas more in tune with their traditional roles. Many pavement sellers and small-scale retailers entered the market under these circumstances.

Yet, trade is not the refuge of illiterate women alone. Many literate and semi-literate women prefer trade to other occupations because it offers them not only financial security, but also a high degree of professional autonomy and freedom. A woman who establishes herself in trade gains a high degree of freedom in her activity than would have been possible in a traditional occupation such as agriculture. For this same reason, some educated women have chosen trade over government jobs.

In general, however, women are integrated into the capitalist mode of production, both at the level of production and distribution of goods. By exchanging petty commodities for money, they become part of

merchant capital. By reinvesting that money in other productive activities, they reinforce and reproduce the capitalist relations of production.

Alternatively, to consolidate their economic position, some women divert their profit from trade to invest in a variety of non-trading activities. In the rural areas, some women combine trading with engagement in transportation services (by investing in locally run jeeps, taxis and buses), a vital element for economic development, and for the quick movement of people and goods from one place to another. Other women have invested their earnings in real estate, and in agricultural ventures, such as share cropping and money-lending to poor farmers; while those women who have connections in the administration, secure government contracts and licenses to enhance their business.

However, only a few women could utilize these opportunities successfully for their benefit. A number of factors are responsible for this- firstly, the lack of education among trading women restricted their access to new opportunities that opened up. Secondly, the Khasi law of inheritance, which follows the principle of *ultimo geniture*, is not conducive to women's economic development; since ancestral property is reserved for the youngest daughter, older daughters generally have few resources to invest in business.

Gender and age stratification combine to constrain women's economic advancement. Despite women's active involvement in the domestic economy, their contribution is generally considered as secondary to that of men. Women are primarily seen as producers, whose duty is to look after the family. Therefore, even when women work, this is seen largely as an extension of their household duties, thus meriting little investment from the family. It is only when a woman advances in age, or when she has consolidated her position in business, that she gains access to family resources. The only female who has unrestricted access to family property is the mother. But even in this regard, patriarchal ideology and women's lack of education prevent many from converting this traditional privilege into an economically successful business venture.

Gender ideology and the domestication of daughters are also some of the factors that constrain women's entrepreneurial development. Even where women are able to overcome the gender barrier and enter the fray of the business world, they face a number of problems that restrict their

ability to succeed. A major factor that impairs the performance of the vast majority of women entrepreneurs in Khasi society is, the lack of practical or professional training and specialized knowledge relating to the job. Many women learned about the various functional requirements of the enterprise after getting into it, and then improving on these procedures as they go along. The lack of training places these women at a disadvantage, especially when they have to deal with government agencies and financial institutions like banks and corporations. This accounts for the small number of women who seek loans and subsidies. Although a number of women are aware that some banks provide loans for self-employment, they remain reluctant to avail of the facility. The reason for this show of hesitation and reluctance are many, included among which are, personal inhibitions and the fear about the inability to repay back the loan. Yet, the large majority is kept back by sheer ignorance about how to access the loan facility. Among those who tried, many have complained of the cumbersome procedures and technicalities involved, stating that these requirements serve as a deterrent to women who seek loans. As a result, women rely heavily on sons or other male members of the family in their dealings with the government and /or non-tribal people. It is not the uneducated and untrained women alone who suffer, though they are certainly more vulnerable. Even educated women have grievances about government procedures being highly problematic to handle.

The heterogeneity of the informal sector enterprises engaged by women reflects, not only the dynamism of the indigenous economy, but also women as a potential agent of economic change. However, women's ability maximize their entrepreneurial talent is constrained by a discriminatory gender ideology, an inefficient government, a corrupt bureaucracy, and a craze for easy money. Nonetheless, such Khasi women are not only a vital part of the market economy; they constitute a small group of powerful businesswomen, who has emerged as part of the wider capitalist class.

### **Political and Administrative Status**

One way of understanding the changing status of women is by taking into account their level of participation in decision-making activities. Women of the Khasi and Jaintia society, though occupying a distinctly higher status in the social and economic spheres, are subject to certain restrictions as far as participation in political affairs and

administrative matters are concerned. In the Khasi-Jaintia hills, women are not allowed to attend the *dorbar* or the village council. The denial of political space to the Khasi women is traditionally rooted. Matrilineal society allows women an important and indispensable space in the private sphere. However, women are meant to take care of their households, and their stepping out into the public sphere is not appreciated. Khasi women enjoy social, cultural and economic freedom, but politics and administration are considered a man's domain.

For the purpose of administrative convenience and also to look after the common affairs of the whole village, a general assembly or *Dorbar Shnong* is constituted. The General Assembly consists of all adult male members of the village. Women have no right to attend such meetings. This is because of the strong belief of the Khasis that "*Haba la kynih ka 'iar kynthei la wai ka pyrthei*", meaning, when a hen crows, it is indicative of the end of the world. Thus, in the traditional Khasi culture, a woman cannot participate in the *dorbar* meetings and deliberations. She cannot deliberate even on issues that would ensure the well-being and security of herself or of her fellow-women in the village. A woman who dares voice her opinion on public affairs is regarded as a 'hen that crows' - a freak of nature. Men zealously guard their political prerogatives by defining politics as an arena for mature and physically fit persons. Men subtly hint that women can be equated with children when they use the simile *Ka kynthei ka khynnah* (the woman the child), to describe women. This view of women and politics is even carried over to the realm of modern political institutions. Women are the keepers of trust and the custodians of the clan and the land. Everything else belongs to them, but not the arts of defence and war, not the art of law-making and the art of making arguments and counter-arguments and peace-making within the village.

Further, according to traditional customs, Khasi women are not given the right to vote in any election to the offices of the traditional chiefs. Deliberations and decisions, planning, administration and policy-framing, and management are the tasks of men. One cannot fail to notice that, in the pretext of socially imposed roles, women in a matrilineal system are restricted to the domestic sphere. There is a tendency of imaging women as essentially those guided by feelings and emotions, as those who can only be caregivers to children and males of the family. Men are imaged as those guided by reason and possessing more physical

strength. It is said that men possess 'twelve strengths' whereas women possess only 'one'. Therefore, men are considered suitable for handling issues in the public sphere. There is also a tendency to project care, concern and feeling as attributes of femininity, while strength, reason and self-assertion as attributes of masculinity. As a result, politics necessarily becomes the male's prerogative.

Women are also deprived of holding public offices of *Syiemship*, *sardarship*, *lyngdohship* and *wahdadarship*. She can never head the village and become a *Rangbah Shnong* (Village Headman); the very terminology excludes women. So far as their active participation in such power related matters is concerned, a vast majority of women are not willing to do so, even if offered as an easy option. The constraints are found to be highly behavioural. The parent's meaningful presence at home where children live and grow can never be ignored. If women are preoccupied with reproductive roles, men will dominate in the emerging power structures. This is a dilemma in the present Khasi society.

The above account brings into sharp focus, the unequal power relations between women and men among the Khasis. However, although women are traditionally disadvantaged, matriliney gives them a comparative autonomy and influence and also provides them with institutional support and security, not readily available to their counterparts in patrilineal societies. Nonetheless, matriliney, far from being a liberating force, have added to women's vulnerability. By vesting descent rights in the mother, women are not only objectified as symbols of their culture and tradition, they also become subjected to a strict social and moral code to uphold the honour of the family and the society.

### **Educational Status**

With regards to education, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was observed that Khasi girls have had access to school education. However, higher education, particularly post-graduate and above, was available only in Assam. Thus, only those who could afford could avail of higher educational opportunities. In any case, educational opportunities at the local level improved the status of women and encouraged them to take a more active role in the community, and later to a certain extent, in the administrative arena.

However, with the coming of the British missionaries to the Khasi land, women had the opportunity to go to school, with some even



excelling in the fields of education and economy. It is interesting to note that, women in Meghalaya are making remarkable progress in the fields of education. For instance in the year 1901, the percentage of female literacy in Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts was 4.01 percent compared to the national level percentage of 0.63. In 2001, the percentage of female literacy in Meghalaya was 60.41 percent which was above the national level with 54.16 percent and in 2011 (P), it was 73.78 percent against the national level of 65.46%.

The spread of education among the Khasi women has brought about some structural changes. They are not only increasingly queuing for seats in Engineering, Medical, Agriculture and other technical colleges, but also excelling in these areas. After receiving education, many have joined government services and brought occupational and spatial mobility to themselves. They have been liberated beyond the traditional regime of menfolk and have become self-sufficient. Those who could not get into government service, settled in and around Shillong city, engaging themselves in different businesses, non-traditional and non-agricultural activities, thus becoming part and parcel of urban life. This has contributed to the inculcation of certain western values.

The spread of education and modernization has now taken a formal turn. This growth of education has led to the generation of awareness which has in turn, transformed the status of Khasi women. With the spread of education, women have come out of their exclusion from the political sphere.

## **Changing power structure of women of Meghalaya**

### **From Traditional to Modernity**

Tradition has put a clear line of demarcation between the roles of men and that of women. A man is a father, an uncle, a bread earner, a warrior and defender, and a ruler. A woman has to look after the family as a mother and sister. In this way, she is always overburdened with her reproductive roles. Women are therefore made to believe that they are the centre around which the entire system of the family depends. She is respected as the progenitor through whom the clan and the community is preserved.

In Meghalaya, there are two types of political institutions: the modern institutions and the traditional institutions. Customarily, the Khasis

believe that women should be confined to the domestic field. The political role of women is only that of a consultant through the adult male members of the domestic groups. With regards to the judicial system, women cannot be members of the jury but they have the right to be heard, although they have no right to decide and participate in their respective village councils.

In spite of being highly educated and employed, women keep themselves aloof from active politics. However, their representation in the offices in Shillong city is unexpectedly high. "In Meghalaya secretariat, 64 percent of the employees are women". Even with a better sex ratio of 972 females per 1000 males in Meghalaya (as per 2001 census), as compared to the national average of 933 per 1000 males, and in spite of the matrilineal tradition and high women literacy rate, women representation in the state cabinet have remained a paltry number. Political participation of women yet remains a critical question.

With time, women have come forward and got themselves involved in political and administrative spheres. Unlike in the past, women have presently emerged as active participants in politics and are associated with different non-government organizations. Khasi women are no longer barred from participating in political and administrative matters. The Government of India Act 1935, paved the way for the participation of women in mainstream politics, by which the Shillong woman seat was created. Thus, in the 1937 Legislative Assembly elections, two women joined the contest, and with the election of Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh, the Assam Legislative Assembly had a woman member for the first time. After 1972, with the attainment of Statehood, the political set up of Meghalaya saw an increase in women joining the election fray. Some of the prominent names being Miriam D. Shira, Maysalin War, Deborah C. Marak, Irin Lyngdoh, Ampareen Lyngdoh and Dikanchi D. Shira. Of these, Roshan Warjri scripted history by becoming the first woman to hold the crucial Home portfolio in the North-East and Eastern India, and the second in India after P. Sabita Indra Reddy in Andhra Pradesh to become Home Minister.

Moreover, out of the two Members of Parliament representing the state of Meghalaya, one is a woman - Agatha K. Sangma from Garo Hills. She is the state's first woman parliamentarian and the youngest-ever woman parliamentarian in the history of Indian Parliamentary Democracy. Further, in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, there are at

present, three women members, namely Irene Lyngdoh, Grace Kharpuri and Teilinia Thangkhiew.

In recent times, the outlook of the society towards women has started to change. Khasi women are now known to have played a significant role in the administrative set up too. Women are also sharing the responsibility of maintaining peace in the locality, and society at large. Today, women have come forward in the executive committees of some *Dorbars*. In some localities of Shillong, like Nongthymmai, women movement for emancipation started since 1988, by which women demanded full participation in their respective local *Dorbar Shnong* (Village Councils). Moreover, in some other localities of Shillong town like Nongrim Hills, Laitumkrah and Lachumiere, women have got a space in the village councils as elected or nominated members. In the urban areas this has caused a substantive change in the role and status of women; however, the political participation of women in village councils is rather remote. Women cannot enter the village *Dorbar* as elected or nominated members. This is so, because a majority of the Khasi villages have not shifted away from traditional practices.

Apart from the social and voluntary organizations, the political parties, whether national or regional, have their affiliated women's wings like the Mahila Congress I Committee and the women's wing of the Hill People Union, etc. Their main objective is to strengthen their political parties by ensuring the participation of women. It is these women's wings of political parties that are raising issues of political and administrative space for women.

The presence of *Seng Longkmie* or Local Women Organizations, present in all the localities, work for the betterment of the society and provide women with opportunities to work for the common good. The Khasi women's contribution has been worthwhile as they have been able to involve themselves, not only in the process of development, but also in the process of the betterment of each locality, by uprooting social evils like drugs and alcoholism. There is also an increasing association of young women involved in social services, health care, marketing of handicrafts, cultural and media activities.

Different women platforms like *Ka Synjuk ki Seng Kynthei*, *Ka Lympung ki Seng Kynthei*, Khasi Women Welfare and Development Association, Meghalaya Women Alliances, and other localized women organizations work for the upliftment of society. Women all over the

whole country face common problems like illiteracy, dropouts, unemployment, poor health, violence, crime, discrimination, harassment, alcoholism, separation and divorce, exploitation and so on. Women in Meghalaya are competitive, intelligent, practical, hard-working and very creative. In addition to the above main factors, other factors such as modernization, urbanization and mass communication have also played a key role in changing the thinking, attitude and outlook of Khasi women.

Many changes were also noticed in the Garo society. There has been a change in the life style of the people brought about and influenced by education, particularly, education of the girl child. Emergence of female professionals and businesswomen, freedom of choice of their life partners, increased choice for consumer goods, practice of keeping sons in the matri-local houses and giving them property rights, are also some of the factors behind the change in lifestyle. As a result, Garo women have created a space for themselves by making their voices heard in family decisions. The other changes, though not much significant, is found in the political participation of women with regards to voting though, not much in terms of contesting.

Codification of customary law is another felt area which could give due weightage to the rights of women. The Garo Autonomous District Council has appointed a committee for the codification of customary laws, members of which, among others, are educated Garo women. A focus on the codification of customary law and on land reform measures in the tribal areas might enable women to meaningfully involve themselves both in the family, community institutions and in the institutions of local governance. A cooperative model as envisaged in the traditional institution would enable women to enhance their participation. Modern education, outside contact and technological changes have provided Garo women with the power to influence the male members of the society. Today, educated Garo women work in offices and firms, their earnings help them in influencing their husbands and family members, thereby facilitating joint decisions with regards to children's education or procurement of durable goods.

Like the Khasi society, the emergence of women agencies in the Garo society is also significant. A number of women organizations were formed before the creation of the state of Meghalaya. One of the oldest women organizations is "Mother's Union" in Tura, founded in the year 1941. This

organization is concerned with the social development of women and is emerging as a sounding board for the collective voice of women.

Now, women in Meghalaya have become self-sufficient and are proving their mettle not only at the home front, but also in their respective professions. Their presence is felt in all spheres - in colleges and universities, in professional studies, in business and trade, in civil services and many other fields. Besides women in politics, there are also other prominent women like Rose Millian Bathew Kharbuli, Chairman of the UPSC, Alvareen Dkhar, Chairman MPSC, Silverine Swer, E.N. Shullai and Patricia Mukhim, Padmashree awardees, and Obilet Tariang, one of the renowned business tycoons of the state. This shows that there is no dearth of women active in various fields in Meghalaya.

To understand change is to understand change in social relationships. With regards to women in Meghalaya, one can say that, there has been a change of perception, attitude and behavioral patterns in terms of gender roles. Change, in this sense, is interactive depending on factors, and degrees of assimilation and response. Factors as education, mass media, law, social organization (women organization), political programmes and policies all contribute to bringing about a change in the perception about women and their participation.

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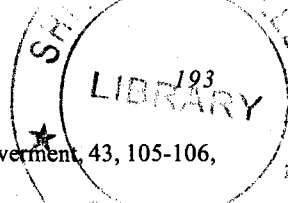
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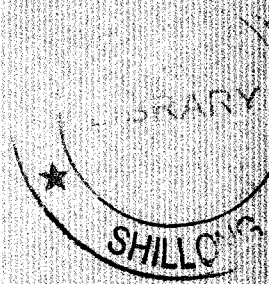
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