



International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

Women's Political Participation in Matrilineal Meghalaya: A Study of Legislative Representation

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: **2583-6528**

Impact Factor (SJIF): **6.876**

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 19/April/2025

Accepted: 22/May/2025

Abstract

Meghalaya, one of the few matrilineal societies in the world, presents a unique paradox—despite tracing lineage and inheritance through women; the realm of political leadership remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. This study investigates women's participation in the political landscape of Meghalaya, with specific focus on their representation in the State Legislative Assembly. By examining electoral trends, party nominations, socio-political dynamics, and the intersection of traditional matrilineal norms with modern democratic structures, the research seeks to understand the complexities that shape women's political trajectories in the state. The study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing from electoral data, interviews, and secondary literature to analyze the extent and nature of women's involvement in Meghalaya's legislative politics. Through this focused lens, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender and political representation in matrilineal yet patriarchal societies.

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Keywords: Women's political participation, matrilineal society, Meghalaya, Legislative Assembly, Gender and politics.

Introduction

Meghalaya, a northeastern Indian state known for its lush landscapes and vibrant tribal cultures, is often cited for its matrilineal social structure—most prominently among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia communities. In this unique social structure, lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother, and women often hold significant social and familial roles. However, this apparently empowering structure does not directly translate into political representation or leadership, especially within formal institutions such as the State Legislative Assembly.

Women's political participation in Meghalaya is marked by contradictions. In the matrilineal social structure women having a central position in family and community life, but their visibility and influence in the political sphere remain limited. The state has witnessed low representation of women legislators over the decades since its formation in 1972, despite its matrilineal identity. This research seeks to explore the patterns, challenges, and prospects of women's political engagement in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly.

By examining the historical trends in women's electoral participation, the role of political parties in candidate selection, and societal perceptions of leadership and gender, this study delves into the interplay between tradition and modernity in shaping the political agency of women. The focus on the state legislative assembly provides a concrete framework to evaluate how gender and governance intersect in a matrilineal yet male-dominated political structure.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between socio-cultural perspectives on matrilineal system and studies on political representation. Specifically, this study will analyze women's political participation in the State Legislative Assembly of Meghalaya and examine the influence of the matrilineal social structure on women's roles in the political sphere.

Research Objectives

To examine the patterns of women's representation in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly over time.

To investigate the challenges and barriers faced by women candidates in contesting elections and holding office in Meghalaya.

To identify strategies and recommendations for enhancing the role of women leaders in the legislative assembly within the context of matrilineal society.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the nature, patterns, and dynamics of women's political participation in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly within the matrilineal social framework. The research methodology comprises the following components:

1. Research Design

The study is primarily descriptive and exploratory, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of women's legislative representation and the socio-political factors influencing it.

2. Data Collection

Primary Data: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with current and former women legislators of Meghalaya to gather first-hand insights into their political experiences, challenges in their political journey.

Secondary Data: Electoral data from the Election Commission of India and Meghalaya State Election Office will be analyzed to track women's representation trends in the legislative assembly over the past decades. Additionally, government reports, and relevant scholarly literature on Meghalaya's matrilineal society and political participation will be reviewed.

3. Sampling

A purposive sampling method will be used to select participants for interviews, focusing on women who have served as members of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly.

4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the trends and patterns and themes related to women's political participation and the influence of matrilineal norms. Secondary data will be examined through content and trend analysis.

Matrilineal Momentum in Meghalaya: Historical Context and Impact on Women's Political Empowerment

Meghalaya, nestled in the northeastern region of India, is marked by a rich cultural tapestry, with its distinctive matrilineal societal structure standing as a cornerstone of its heritage. The matrilineal tradition, prevalent among the Khasi and Garo communities, traces lineage and inheritance through the female line, conferring unique social and economic standing to women. This historical context of matrilineality in Meghalaya serves as a crucial backdrop to understanding the contemporary dynamics of women's political empowerment. The roots of matrilineal systems in Meghalaya are deeply embedded in indigenous customs and beliefs, reflecting an intricate balance between tradition and modernity. Historical narratives highlight that this matrilineal ethos was not merely a social arrangement but also a means of ensuring familial stability and continuity. Women, as central figures in the matrilineal structure, held significant roles in decision-making processes, thereby contributing to the socio-economic fabric of their communities.

As Meghalaya traversed the path to statehood and embraced democratic governance in the post-independence era, the matrilineal momentum played a pivotal role in shaping women's political empowerment. Unlike many regions where patriarchal norms often restrict women's participation in

public affairs, Meghalaya's matrilineal foundation laid the groundwork for a more inclusive political environment. Women, having traditionally held influential roles within their communities, found themselves well-positioned to step into leadership roles on a broader political stage.

The impact of matrilineal social structure on women's political empowerment is multifaceted. Firstly, the matrilineal system engendered a social climate that acknowledged and valued women's contributions, fostering a sense of empowerment. This cultural affirmation of women's capabilities translated into increased political aspirations and participation. Secondly, the matrilineal structure, by providing women with an elevated social status, paved the way for their involvement in decision-making processes beyond traditional realms. In the 21st century, as Meghalaya's Legislative Assembly became the arena for democratic representation, the matrilineal momentum continued to shape the narrative of women's political leadership. Women from matrilineal societies found themselves navigating a political landscape where their historical empowerment intersected with contemporary aspirations for gender equality. The matrilineal structure not only encouraged women to seek political office but also influenced voter perceptions, challenging conventional gender norms and fostering an environment more receptive to women in leadership roles.

The matrilineal momentum in Meghalaya, rooted in historical traditions, has been a catalyst for women's political empowerment. It has provided a unique foundation upon which women have built their political aspirations, challenging stereotypes and contributing to a more inclusive and representative governance. Understanding this matrilineal context is essential for unraveling the intricacies of women's political leadership dynamics in Meghalaya and appreciating the enduring impact of cultural heritage on contemporary socio-political landscapes.

Women Leadership Dynamics: A Focus on Political Representation in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly

Meghalaya, one of the states in the Indian union, is the homeland of three hill communities, the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias. All these communities have matrilineal societies where the clan name is taken from the mother. Women in Meghalaya enjoyed a lot of freedom where she is not dictated by anybody. Nobody would ask her who her father is or who her husband is, before they get to know the person, unlike in a patriarchal set-up, where she has to demonstrate her identity as the daughter or the wife of so and so to the world. (Misra, 2007, p.197) The matrilineal system provides for an elevated position of the women in the Khasi society. The members of a clan trace their descent through a female. The women in Khasi and Garo society inherit property and the youngest daughter among the Khasis and any daughter among the Garo remain the custodian of the family property. (Indian Anthropological Society, 2007) When we turned to the field of politics we find that women's presence in the legislative bodies is scarce. The Government of India Act 1935, provided for the representation of women by the reservation of a seat from the Shillong Constituency in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The Act also permitted women to contest not only from the reserved seats but also from the general seats. In 1937, two women contested the reserved seat, Mrs Berlina Diengdoh and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. The latter was elected and it was for the first time that a woman became a member of the Legislative Assembly. Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was included in the Muhammad Saadulla's ministry

in 1939 till 1941 and again from 1942 till 1945. Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh was the first lady to become a cabinet minister in the North East. In 1946, five women contested in the elections, they were Mrs Bonniely Khongmen, T. W. Shadap, Berlina Diengdoh, Padma Kumari Gohain and Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh. Except Mrs B. Khongmen who was a Congress nominee, all four ladies contested as independents. Padma K. Gohain contested the general seat, the others, the Shillong women seat, Mrs B. Khongmen was elected. (Joshi,2004,p: 291). The state of Meghalaya attained full- fledged statehood on January 21, 1972. But looking back at the past history of its legislative Assembly and general election to the union legislature, representation of women lags far behind. Electoral politics is still considered as the domain of men. It appears that women themselves are not interested in contesting elections maybe of the fact that they are so embedded into the traditional belief that politics is the arena of men only.(Kharkongor,2018) So far from 1972 to 2023, only 21 women candidates have won in the State Assembly election of 60 seats. A brief survey of the number of women elected representatives to the State Assembly from 1972- 2023 is listed below.

Election Year	Total Women Contested	Total Women Elected
1972	09	01
1978	07	01
1983	08	Nil
1988	03	02
1993	07	01
1998	15	03
2003	14	02
2008	21	01
2013	25	04
2018	32	03

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Report

From the statistical data of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly elections spanning from 1972 to the most recent election in 2023, it is evident that women's participation has remained consistently low and not satisfactory when compared to their male counterparts and the total number of seats available. Despite forming nearly half of the population, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in the legislative process. However, a positive trend can be observed in the gradual increase in the number of women contesting elections over the years.

This growing interest among women to enter electoral politics reflects a slow but promising shift towards greater political awareness and participation, offering hope for a more balanced and inclusive legislative representation in the future. Women's political representation in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly has seen notable progress, partly influenced by the matrilineal momentum ingrained in the state's cultural fabric. While the matrilineal ethos historically empowered women within their communities, its impact on broader political structures has been instrumental in creating opportunities for women to engage in formal politics. From the reports and records like assembly proceedings, debates and other related documents it is visible that Women leaders in Meghalaya have been active participants in shaping policies, advocating for social change, and contributing to the democratic discourse within the assembly.

Challenges and Barriers

While the matrilineal system confers social and economic importance to women, it does not necessarily translate into political empowerment. Women in Meghalaya continue to face several challenges when it comes to participating in formal politics:

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

Despite the matrilineal structure, decision-making power largely remains with men. Clan and village councils (Dorbar Shnong), especially among the Khasi and Jaintia tribes, are traditionally male-dominated. Women are often not allowed to participate in these institutions, which serve as crucial training grounds and political networks for aspiring leaders. This exclusion limits women's access to political platforms and leadership experiences.

Political Party Structures and Patriarchy

Most political parties in Meghalaya, like in other parts of India, are dominated by male leadership. Women are often sidelined in party hierarchies and denied tickets to contest elections. Even when they do contest, they may not receive adequate organizational support or resources. Patriarchal attitudes persist within political institutions, which continue to see women as less capable leaders.

Economic Constraints

Political campaigning in Meghalaya, as elsewhere, requires financial resources. Many women, despite inheriting property, may not have full control over it or access to liquid financial assets necessary for electoral competition. This economic dependency or limitation can prevent them from entering or sustaining a political career.

Balancing Public and Private Roles

The burden of household responsibilities and caregiving, though slightly more negotiable in a matrilineal context, still falls disproportionately on women. This dual burden restricts the time, energy, and mobility needed for active political engagement.

Conclusion

This study of women's political participation in matrilineal Meghalaya reveals a significant gap between cultural status and political power. Despite the matrilineal system that gives women social and economic recognition, their representation in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly remains disproportionately low. The research shows that traditional male-dominated institutions, patriarchal political party structures, social perceptions of leadership, and economic and structural barriers continue to restrict women's entry and success in formal politics.

The findings indicate that matrilineality alone does not guarantee political empowerment. Women face systemic challenges, including exclusion from grassroots decision-making bodies, limited access to political platforms, and the burden of balancing public responsibilities with private roles. To address these challenges, the study recommends the implementation of reservations for women in the state legislature and local governing bodies, which would help ensure minimum representation. Political parties should also adopt internal reforms to actively promote women candidates and include them in leadership roles. Public awareness campaigns are necessary to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes and to foster broader acceptance of women in

political positions. Moreover, leadership training, mentorship opportunities, and financial assistance would empower women to participate more confidently in the political process. Finally, institutional reforms are needed to include women in traditional decision-making structures, ensuring that their voices are heard from the grassroots to the state level. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Meghalaya move towards true gender-inclusive political representation.

To achieve true gender equality in Meghalaya's political landscape, cultural respect must be matched with institutional support, policy change, and sustained public engagement. This study highlights the urgent need for both grassroots and top-down interventions to bridge the gap between matrilineal identity and political agency.

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